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SIGNA.

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SIGNA.

SIGNA.

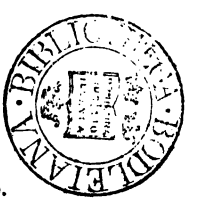
A Story.

By OUIDA.

AUTHOR OF "TRICOTRIN," "PASCAREL," "FOLLE FARINE," ETC.

"Getto una palma al mare, e mi va al fondo.
Agli altri vedo il piombo navigare."—TUSCAN SONG.

I throw a palm into the sea: the deeps devour it.
Others throw lead, and lo! it buoyant sails.



IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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SIGNA.

CHAPTER I.

He was only a little lad coming singing through the summer weather; singing as the birds do in the thickets, as the crickets do in the wheat at night, as the acacia bees do all the day long in the high tree tops in the sunshine.

Only a little lad with brown eyes and bare feet, and a wistful heart driving his sheep and his goats, and carrying his sheaves of cane or millet, and working among the ripe grapes when the time came, like all the rest, here in the bright Signa country.

Few people care much for our Signa and all it has seen and known. Few people even know

anything of it at all, except just vaguely as a mere name. Assisi has her saint, and Perugia her painters, and Arezzo her poet, and Siena her virgin, and Settignano her sculptor, and Prato her great carmelite, and Vespignano her inspired shepherd, and Fiesole her angel-monk, and the village Vinci her mighty master; and poets write of them all for sake of the dead fame which they embalm. But Signa has found no poet, though her name lies in the pages of the old chroniclers like a jewel in an old king's tomb, written there ever since the Latin days when she was first named Signome—a standard of war set under the mountains.

It is so old our Signa, no man could chronicle all it has seen in the centuries; but not one in ten thousand travellers thinks about it. Its people plait straw for the world, and the train from the coast runs through it: that is all that it has to do with other folks.

Passengers come and go from the sea to the city, from the city to the sea, along the great iron highway, and perhaps they glance at the stern, ruined walls, at the white houses on the cliffs, at

the broad river with its shining sands, at the blue hills with the poplars at their base, and the pines at the summits, and they say to one another that this is Signa.

But it is all that they ever do do; it is only a glance, then on they go through the green and golden haze of Valdarno. Signa is nothing to them, only a place that they stop at a second. And yet Signa is worthy of knowledge.

She is so ancient and so wise, and in her way so beautiful too; and she holds so many great memories in her; she has so many faded laurel-boughs as women in their years of age keep the dead rose-leaves of their days of love; and once on a time — in the Republic's time, as her sons will still turn from the plough or rest on the oar to tell to a stranger with pride;—she was a very Amazon and Artemis of the mountains setting her breast boldly against all foes, and they were many, who came down over the wild western road, from the sea or from the Apennines, with reddened steel and blazing torch to harry and fire the fields, and spread famine and war to the gates of Florence.

These days are gone.

The years of its glory are done. It is a grey quiet place which now strays down by the water and now climbs high on the hill, and faces the full dawn of the day and sees the sunset reflected in the mirror of the river, and is starry with fireflies in midsummer, and at noon looks drowsy in the heat and seems to dream—being so very old. The buttressed walls are ruins. The mass bell swings over the tower roofs. The fortresses are changed to farms. The vines climb where the culverins blazed. White bullocks and belled mules tread to and fro the tracks which the free lances made; and the peasants sing at their ploughs where the hosts of the invaders once thundered.

Its ways are narrow, its stones are crooked, its summer dust is dense, its winter mire is heavy, its hovels are many, its people are poor—oh yes, no doubt—but it is beautiful in various ways and worthy of a scholar's thought and of an artist's tenderness. Only the poet does not come to make it quoted and beloved by the world as one

single line on the drifting autumn leaves has rendered Vallombrosa.

Here where the ancient walls of its citadel rise hoary and broken against the blueness of the sky; there where the arches of the bridges span the river, and the sand and the shallows and the straw that is drying in summer shine together yellow in the sun; here where under the sombre pointed archways the little children play, their faces like the cherubs and the cupids of the renaissance; there where the cobblers and coopers and the plaiting maidens and the makers of the yellow rush brooms, all work away under lintels, and corbels, and carved beam timbers, four hundred years old if one; here where through the gateways with their portcullises woven over by the spiders, there only pass the patient mules with sacks of flour, or the hay carts dropping grasses, or the waggons of new wine; there where the villas that were all fortresses in the fierce fighting times of old, gleam white in the light upon their crests of hills with their cypresses like sentinels around them, and breadths of corn and vineyards traversed by green grassy paths, that lead upward

to where the stone pine and the myrtle make sweet the air together. In all these Signa is beautiful; most of all, of course, in the long light radiant summer when the nightingales are singing everywhere, noon as well as night; the summer which seems to last almost all the year, for you can only tell how it comes and goes by the coming and the going of the flowers; the long-lived summer that is ushered in by the daffodils, those golden chamberlains of the court of flowers, and dies, as a king should, on a purple bed of anemones, when the bells of the feast of the saints sound its requiem from hill to hill. And Signa revels in all that brightness of the Tuscan weather, and all about her seems singing, from the cicala piping away all day long, through the hottest heat, to the mandolines that thrill through the leaves at night as the peasants go by strumming the chords of their love-songs. Summer and song and sunshine;—Signa lies amidst them like some war-bruised shield of a knight that has fallen amongst the roses and holds the nest of a lark.

One day in summer Signa kept the Feast of

the Corpus Domini with more pomp and praise than usual. The bells were ringing all over the plain and upon the hill-sides, and the country people were coming in from all the villages that lie scattered like so many robins' nests amongst the olives and the maize plumes and the arbutus thickets everywhere around. They were like figures out of a Fra Bartolommeo or a Ghirlandajo as they came down through the ripe corn and the red poppies from the old grey buildings up above; in their trailing white dresses and their hoods of blue, with the unlit tapers in their hands, and the little white-robed children running before with their chaplets of flowers still wet from the dew. It was the procession of Demeter transmitted through all the ages, though it was called the Feast of Christ; it might have been the hymns of Ceres that they sang, and Virgil might have looked upon them with a smile of praise as they passed through the waving wheat and under the boughs red with cherries.

The old faith lives under the new, and the old worship is not dead, here in the country of Horace and in the fields where Proserpine wandered.

The people are Pagan still; only now they call it being Christian, and mingle together Cupid and the Madonna in their songs.*

It was fairest summer weather. There was sure harvest and promise of abundant vintage. The sweet strong west wind was blowing from the sea, but not too roughly, only just enough to shake the scent out of the acacia blossoms and fan open the oleanders.

The peasantry were in good heart and trooped down to the feast of the Body of God from the loneliest farmstead on the highest hill-crest; and from every villa chapel set along the mountains, or amongst the green sea of the valley vines, there was a bell ringing above an open door.

The chief celebration was at Signa, which had broken from its usual ways, and had music on

* Si è partita una nave dallo porto,
Ed è partito lo mio struggimento.
Madre Maria, dategli conforto
Acciò vada la nave a salvamento.
Lo mare gli si possa abbonacciare
E le sue vele doventin d' argento.
E tu Cupido, che lo puo' aiutare,
Cogli sospiri tuoai mandagli il vento.

Rispetto Toscano.

this great service because a mighty bishop had come on a visit in its neighbourhood, and all its roads and streets and lanes were swept and garnished and watered, and at many open casements there were pots of lilies, white and orange, and in many dark archways groups of little children on whose tiny shoulders it would have seemed quite natural to see such wings of rose or azure as Il Beato gave his cherubim.

The procession came out from the white walls above on the cliff, and down the steep ways of the hill and across the bridge, and through the Lastra to the little church of the Misericordia. There were great silk banners waving heavily; gold fringe that shone and swayed; priests' vestments that gleamed with silver and colour; masses of flowers and leaves borne aloft; curling croziers and crimson baldacchini; and then came

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A ship goes out from port,
And with it goes my own immense desire.
Oh, Mother Mary, lend it strength and comfort,
So that the ship may steer to sure salvation.
So that the sea that bears it may be stilled,
And all its sails become of silver pure.
And thou, dear Cupid, who canst aid it too,
Breathe forth thy sighs and waft it fairest winds.

Tuscan Popular Song.

all the white-clothed contadini, by tens, by twenties, by hundreds, and the cherubic children singing in the sun; it was Signa in the Middle Ages once again, and Fra Giovanni might have stood by and painted it all in a choral book, or Marcillat have put it in a stained window, and have illumined it with the azure sky for its background, and the rays of the morning sun slanting down, like beams that streamed straight to earth from the throne of God.

The procession came down the hill and across the bridge, with its irregular arches and its now shallow green water shining underneath, and on its sands the straw lying drying, and beyond it the near hills with their dusky pines, and the white streaks where the quarries were cut, and the blue haze of the farther mountains.

All the people were chaunting the Laus Deo—chaunting with chests made strong by the mountain air, and lips made tuneful by the inheritance of melody; men and women and children were all singing, from the old white-haired bishop who bore the host, to the four-year-old baby that trod on the hem of its mother's dress.

But above all the voices there rose one sweetest and clearest of all, and going up into heaven, as it seemed, as a lark's does on a summer morning. He was only a little fellow that sang—a little boy of the Lastra a Signa, poorer than all the rest; with his white frock, clean, but very coarse, and a wreath of scarlet poppies on his auburn curls; a very little fellow, ten years old at most, with thin brown limbs and a lean wistful face, and the straight brows of his country, with dark eyes full of dreams beneath them, and naked feet that could be fleet as a hare's over the dry yellow grass or the crooked sharp stones.

He was always hungry, and never very strong, and certainly simple and poor as a creature could be, and he knew what a beating meant as well as any dog about the farm. He lived with people who thrashed him oftener than they fed him. He was almost always scolded, and bore the burden of others' faults. He had never had a whole shirt or a pair of shoes in all his life. He kept goats on one of the dusky sweet-scented hillsides above Signa, and bore, like them, the wind and the weather, the scorch and the storm.

And yet, by God's grace and the glory of childhood, he was happy enough as he went over the bridge and through the white dust, chaunting his psalm in the rear of the priests, in the ceremonies of the Corpus Domini.

For the music was in his head and in his heart; and the millions of leaves and the glancing water seemed to be singing with him, and he did not feel the flints under his feet, or the heat of them, as he went singing out all his little soul to the river and the sky and the glad June sunshine, and he was quite happy, though he was of no more moment in the great human world than any one of the brown grilli in the wheat, or tufts of rosemary in the quarryside; and he did not feel the sharpness of the stones underneath his feet or the scorch of them as he went barefoot along the street, because he was always looking up at the brightness of the sky, and expecting to see it open and to see the faces of curly-headed winged children peep out from behind the sunrays as they did in the old pictures in the villa chapels.

The priests told him he would see them for

a certainty if he were good; and he had been good, or at least had tried to be, but the heavens never had opened yet.

It is hard work to be good when you are very little and very hungry, and have many sticks to beat you, and no mother's lips to kiss you.

But he tried in his own small way. When he carried the bright blue plums to the market, not to taste even one when his mouth was parched with the dust and the sun; to let his reed-flute lie mute while he searched for a straying kid; to tell the truth, though it cost him a thrashing; to leave his black bread untouched on a feast morning, though he was so hungry, because he was going to confession; to forbear from pulling the ripe grapes as he went along the little grass paths through the vines;—these were the things that were so hard, and that he tried his best to do, because in his little dim mind he saw what was just, and in his loneliness endeavoured with all his might to follow it, that he might see the faces of the angels some day; and he wondered now why he could not see the cherubs through the blue smiling sky,

as the old fresco-painters had done who did not want it half so much as he did, because no doubt the painters were wise men and knew a great deal, and were very happy, and were not like him, who was always wanting to know everything, and could never get any one to tell.

The old painters would have painted him, and would have made a cherub of him, with his wreath of poppies and his wondering eyes and his little singing mouth, and would have taken all the leanness out of his face, and the paleness out of his cheeks, and the darns out of his little coarse frock, and would have made his field-flowers roses of paradise, and would have glorified him, and made him a joy to the wondering world for ever.

But he did not know that; he did not know that the painters never saw any other little angels than just such foot-tired and sun-tanned little angels as he, which their genius lifted up and transfigured into the likeness of the children of God.

He did not know that Fra Angelico would have kissed him, and Raffaelle would have put

him for ever in the internal sunshine of the Loggie, with gold rays about his head and the lilies of Mary in his hands.

He only looked up—in vain—for the cherubs in the shining morning skies, and was sorry that he was not good enough to have the right to see them; and yet was glad at heart as he went carrying his taper in the rear of the silken banners and the silvered robes and the chaunting contadini, over the green sunlightened Arno water, with the midsummer corn blowing on all the hills around, and the west wind bringing the salt of the sea with it to strengthen the young bud-clusters of the vine.

Glad—because he was so young, and because he was sure of one creature that loved him, and because the music thrilled him to his heart's delight, and because it was a happiness to him only to sing, as it is to the thrush in the depths of the woods when the day dawns, or to the nightingale when she drinks the dew in heats of noon off the snow of a magnolia flower.

He had a little lute of his own, given to him by the only hand that ever gave him anything.

Where he lived he might not play it on pain of its being broken; but upon the hills he did, and along the country roads; and when people were asleep in their beds in Signa, they would be awakened by notes that were not the birds' rippling up the street in the sweet silent dark, and going higher and higher and higher—it was only the little fellow playing and singing as he went along in the dusk of the dawn to his work.

In the Lastra no one thought anything of it. In any other country, lattices would have been opened and heads hung out and breaths of deep pleasure held to listen better, because the child's music was wonderful in its way, or at least would have been so elsewhere. But here there was so much music everywhere: nobody noticed much. It was no more than a hundred other lutes strumming at cottage doors, than a thousand other stornelli or rispetti sung as the oxen were yoked.

There is always song somewhere.

As the wine-waggon creaks down the hill, the waggoner will chaunt to the corn that grows upon either side of him. As the miller's mules cross the bridge, the lad as he cracks his whip will hum

to the blowing alders. In the red clover, the labourers will whet their scythes and sickles to a trick of melody. In the quiet evenings a kyrie eleison will rise from the thick leaves that hide a village chapel. On the hills the goatherd, high in air, amongst the arbutus branches, will scatter on the lonely mountain side stanzas of purest rhythm. By the sea-shore, where Shelley died, the fisherman, rough and salt, and weatherworn, will string notes of sweetest measure under the tamarisk tree on his mandoline. But the poetry and the music float on the air like the leaves of roses that blossom in a solitude, and drift away to die upon the breeze: there is no one to notice the fragrance, there is no one to gather the leaves.

The songs of the people now are like their fireflies in summer. They make night beautiful all over the dusky hills, and the seas of vine, and the blowing fields of maize, in a million lonely places of the mountains and the plains. But the fireflies are born in the corn and die in it; few eyes see their love-fires, except those of the nightingale and the shrew mouse.

Theocritus cried aloud on his Sicilian muses,

and the world heard him and has treasured the voice of his sweet complaining.

But the muse of these people now lives with the corncrake under the wheat, and the swallow under the house-eaves, and is such a simple natural home-born thing that they think of her no more than the firefly does of her luminance. And so they have no Theocritus, but only ever-renewing bursts of song everywhere as the millet grows ripe, and the lemon-tree flowers, and the red poppies leap with the corn.

Often they do not know what they sing:—Does the firefly know that she burns?

This little fellow did not know what he sang.

He did not know what he was.

At home he was always being told that he had no right to exist at all; perhaps he had not; he did not know.

Himself, he thought God had made him to sing, made him just for that; as he made the finches and nightingales. But he did not tell any one so. At home they would have asked him what should the great God want

with his puny oat pipe. Toto could make as good a noise cutting a reed in the fields any day.

Perhaps Toto could. He thought his own voice better, but he was not sure. He was only glad to sing, because all the world seemed singing with him, and all the sky seemed one vast space of sweetest sound—as, perhaps, it seems to a bird, who knows?

When he went to bed in the hay he could hear the nightingales and the owls and the grilli singing all together in the trees behind the village and in the fields that stretched by the river; and in the dusk of the dawn when he ran out with his little bare feet, dripping with dew, there were a million little voices hymning in the day. That was what he heard. Other people, no doubt, heard cart-wheels, and grinding mills, and the scolding of women, and the barking of dogs, and the creaking of doors, and a thousand other discordant things; but to him the world was full of the singing birds and the humming insects, and the blue heavens teemed with a choir of angels: he could not see them, but he

heard them, and he knew they were near, and that was enough: he could wait.

"Do you hear anything up there?" the other children would ask him, when he stood listening with his eyes lifted, and they could not see so much as a bird, and he would look back to them quite sorrowfully.

"Do you not hear, too? You are deaf then!"

But the children of Signa would not allow that they were deaf, and pelted and fought him for saying so. Deaf, indeed! when it was he who was the simpleton hearing a bird sing where none was.

Were they deaf? or, was he dreaming?

The children of Signa and he never agreed which was which.

It is the old eternal quarrel between the poet and the world; and the children were like the world, they were strong in numbers; since they could see no bird, they would have it there could be no music, and they boxed his ears to cure him of hearing better than his neighbours.

Only it did not cure him.

His angels sang above him this day of the

Corpus Domini, and he did not feel the sun hot on his bare head, nor the stones sharp under his bare feet, and he did not remember that he was hungry, and that he had been beaten that morning, until the music ceased suddenly, and he dropped to earth out of the arms of the angels.

Then he felt his bruises, and the want of food gnawed in him, and he gathered up his little white acolyte's dress and ran as quickly as he could, the withering poppies shaking off his hair.

He was only Pippa's child.

CHAPTER II.

THERE is wild weather in winter at Signa. The mountain streams brim over and the great historic river sweeps out in full flood, and the bitter Alpine wind tears like a living thing over the hills and across the plain. Not seldom the low-lying fields become sheets of dull tawny water, and the little hamlets amongst them are all flooded, and from the clock-towers the tolling bells cry aloud for succour, while the low, white houses seem to float like boats.

In these winters, if the harvests before have been bad, the people suffer much. They have little or no bread, and they eat the raw grass even sometimes. The country looks like a lake

in such weather when the floods are on; only for ships there are churches, and the lighthouses are the trees; and like rocky islands in all directions the village roofs and the villa walls gleam red and shine grey in the rain. It is only a short winter, and the people know that when the floods rise and spread, then they will find compensation, later on, for them in the doubled richness of grass and measure of corn.

Still, it is hard to see the finest steer of the herd dashed a lifeless dun-coloured mass against the foaming piles of the bridge; it is hard to see the young trees and the stacks of hay whirled together against each other; it is hard to watch the broken crucifix and the cottage bed hurled like dead leaves on the waste of waters; it is hardest of all to see the little curly head of a drowned child drift with the boughs and the sheep and the empty hencoop and the torn house door down the furious course of the river.

Signa has seen this through a thousand winters and more in more or less violence, and looked on

untouched herself; high set on her hills like a fortress, as indeed she was, in the old republican days.

In one of these wild brief winters, in a drenching night of rain, a woman came down on foot along the high road that runs from the mountains, the old post road by which one can travel to the sea, only no one now ever takes that way. In sunshine and mild weather it is a glorious road, shelving sheer to the river valley on one side and on the other hung over with bold rocks and bluffs dusky with ilex and pine; and it winds and curves and descends and changes as only a mountain road can do, with the smell of its rosemary and its wild myrtle sweet at every turn. But on a winter's night of rain it is very dreary, desolate and dark.

The woman stumbled down it as best she might.

She had come on foot by short stages all the way from the sea some forty miles over hill and plain. She carried a bundle with her, and never let go her hold on it however wildly the wind seized and shook her, nor however roughly the

rain blew her blind. For the bundle was a child.

Now and then she stopped and leaned against the rocks or the stem of a tree and opened her cloak and looked at it; her eyes had grown so used to the thick darkness that she could see the round of its little red cheek and the curve of its folded fist and the line of its closed eyelashes. She would stop a minute sometimes and bend her head and listen, if the wind lulled, to the breathing of its parted lips set close against her breast; then she would take breath herself and go onward.

The child was a year old, and a boy, and a heavy weight, and she was not a strong woman now, though she had once been so; and she had walked all the way from the sea. She began to grow dizzy, and to feel herself stumble like a footsore mule that has been driven until he is stupid and has lost his sureness of step and his capacity for safety of choice. She was drenched through, and her clothes hung in a soaked dead weight upon her. Even with all her care she could not keep the child quite dry.

Somewhere through the darkness she could hear bells tolling the hour. It was eight o'clock, and she had been in hopes to reach Signa before the night fell.

The boy began to stir and cry.

She stopped and loosened her poor garments and gave him her breast. When he grew pacified, she stumbled on again; the child was quiet; the rain beat on her naked bosom, but the child was content and quiet; so she went on so.

Sometimes she shivered. She could not help that. She wondered where the town was. She could not see the lights. In earlier years she had known the country step by step as only those can who are born in the air of it and tread it daily in their ways of work. But now she had forgotten how the old road ran. Her girlhood seemed so far away; so very, very far. And yet she was only twenty-two years of age.

But then life does not count by years. Some suffer a lifetime in a day, and so grow old between the rising and the setting of a sun.

She had gone over the road so many times in

the warm golden dawns and the white balmy nights, plaiting her wisps of straw, bare-headed in the welcome air, and with a poppy or a briar-rose set behind her ear for vanity's sake rather than for the flower's. But she had been long away—though she was so young—at least it seemed very long to her, and with absence she had lost all the peasant's instinct of safe movement in the dark, which is as sure as an owl's or an ass's, and comes by force of long habit and long treading of the same familiar way. She was not sure of her road; not even sure of her footing. The wind terrified her, and she heard the loud surge of the Arno waters below; beating and foaming in flood. She was weak too from long fatigue, and the weight of the water in her clothes, and of the child in her arms, pulled her earthward.

No one passed by her.

Every one was housed, except sentries on the church-towers watching the rising of the waters, and shepherds getting their cattle upward from the low-lying pastures on to the hills.

She was all alone on the old sea road, and if

she were near the lights of Signa she could not see them for the steam and mist of the furious rain.

But she walked on resolutely, stumbling often over the great loose stones. She did not care for herself. Life was over for her. She would have been glad to lie down and die where she was. But if the boy were not under some roof before morning, she knew he would perish of cold in her arms. For she could give him so little warmth herself. She shivered in all her veins and all her limbs; and she was soaked through like a drowned thing, and he was wet also. So she went on, growing frightened, though her temper was bold, and only keeping her courage to move by feeling now and then as she went for the fair face of him at her breast. But the touch of her hand made him cry—it was so cold—and so even that comfort ceased for her, and she could only pray in a dumb unconscious way to God to keep the numbness out of her arms lest they should drop the boy as she went.

At a turn in the road there is a crucifix—a wooden one set in the stone.

She sat down a moment under it, and rested as well as she could, and tried to think of heaven. But the wind would not let her. It tore the covering off her head, and tossed her long hair about; it scourged her with a storm of snapt boughs; it stung her with a shower of shrivelled leaves; it pierced through and through her poor thin clothes. She prayed a little as well as she could in the torment of it, but it went round and round her in so mad a whirl that she could not remember how the words should go. Only she remembered to keep the child warm, as a mother-sheep sets her body between the lamb and the drifts of the snow.

After a while he began to cry.

Do what she would she could not keep a sense of chilliness and discomfort from reaching him; he wanted the ease and rest of some little cosy bed; her cramped arms held him ill, and the old shawl that wrapped him up was wet and cold.

She murmured little words to him, and tried even to sing some scrap of old song; but her voice failed her, and the child was not to be

comforted. He cried more, and stirred restlessly. With great effort she bent her stiffened knees, and rose, and got on her way again. The rocking movement, as she carried him and walked on, stilled him a little.

She wished that she had dared to turn up a path higher on the mountain that she knew of, which she had passed as the Ave Maria bell had rung. But she had not dared.

She was not sure who was there; what welcome or what curse she might get. He who was certain to be master there now, had always been fierce with her and stern; and he might be married, and new faces be there too—she could not tell; five years were time enough for so much change.

She had not dared go up the path; now that it was miles behind her she wished that she had taken it. But it was too late now. The town she knew, must be much the nearer of the two, now that she had come down so far; so she went onward in the face of the blinding rainstorm. She would go up in the morning, she thought, and tell him the truth; if he were

brutal to herself, he would not let the child starve; she would go up in the morning—so she said, and walked onward.

Her foot had slipped a dozen times, and she had recovered her footing and gone on safe. Once again in the dark she slipped, her foot slid farther on loose wet earth, a stone gave way, she clutched the child with one arm, and flung out the other—she could not see what she caught at in the dark. It was a bush of furze. The furze tore her skin, and gave way. She slipped farther and farther, faster and faster; the soil was so drenched, and the stones were unloosed. She remembered the road enough to know that she was going down, down, down, over the edge. She clasped the child with both arms once more, and was borne down through the darkness to her death.

She knew nothing more; the dark night closed in on her; she lost the sound of the ringing bells, and she ceased to feel the burden of the child.

CHAPTER III.

An hour later two men came with lanthorns into the fields that lie between the rough vineyards underneath the road from the sea. They had sheep there, which they were going to drive into the town in the morning, and they were afraid that the flock, terrified in the winds and rains, might have broken loose, and strayed across the iron rails of the other road that runs by the river, and might get crushed under the wheels of the night trains running from the west.

As they went they stumbled against something on the ground, and lowered their lights to look.

There was a broken bramble-bush, and some crushed ferns, and a thing that had fallen from

the height above on the soaking soil. By their dim lanthorns they saw that the thing was a woman, and bending the light fuller on her as well as they could for the rain, they saw that she had been stunned or killed by the fall.

There was a great stone on which the back of her head had struck. She lay face upward, with her limbs stretched out; her right arm was close round the body of a living child; her breast was bare.

The child was breathing and asleep; he had fallen upon his mother, and so had escaped unhurt.

The men had been born peasants, and they were used to wring the throats of trapped birds and to take lambs from their mothers with small pity. They lifted the boy with some roughness and some trouble from the stiffening arm that enclosed him; he began to wail and moan; he was very wet and miserable, and he said a little word which was a call for his mother, like the pipe of a little bird that has fluttered out of the nest, and lies cold on the grass and frightened.

One of them took him up, and wrapped his cloak across the little sobbing mouth.

The other knelt down, and tried to make his light burn better, and laid his hand on the woman's breast to feel for a pulse of life. But she was quite dead. He did what he could to call back life, but it was all in vain; at length he covered her breast, and stared up at his fellow.

"This looks like Pippa," he said, slowly, with a sound as of awe in his voice.

The other lowered his light too and looked.

"Yes, it is like Pippa," he said, slowly, also.

Then they were both silent for some moments, the lanthorn light blinking in the rain.

"Yes, it is Pippa; yes, certainly, it is Pippa," said the first one stupidly; and he ran his hand with a sort of shudder over the outline of her features and her form.

The one who held the child turned his light on the little wet face; the baby ceased to cry, and opened his big, dark, wondering eyes at the flame.

"And whose byblow is this?" said he.

"The devil knows," said he who knelt by the mother. "But it is Pippa. Look here on her left breast—do you see? there is the little three-cornered scar of the wound I gave her with my knife, at the wine fair, that day."

The other looked closer while the rain beat on the white cold chest of the woman.

"Yes, it must be Pippa."

Then they were both silent again a little, for they were Pippa's brothers.

"Let us go and tell them in the Lastra, and get the bier," said the one who knelt by her, getting up on to his feet, with a sullen dazed gloom on his dark face.

"And leave her here?" said the one who had the child.

"Why not? nobody will run away with the dead!"

"But this little beast—what can one do with him?"

"Carry him to your wife."

"There are too many at home."

"She has one of his age; she can take him."

"She will never touch Pippa's boy."

"Give him to me, then, and stay you here."

"No, that I dare not—the foul fiend might come after her."

"The foul fiend take your terrors. Let us get into the Lastra; we can see then. We must tell the Misericordia, and get the bier——"

"There is no such haste; she is stone dead. What a pipe this brat has! One would think it was a pig with the knife in its throat."

"It is very cold. Who would have thought it could have lived—such a fall as that, and such a night!"

"It lives because nobody wants it. She had no gold about her, had she?

"I do not know."

The one who held the child stooped over the dead woman awhile, then rose with a sigh of regret—

"Not a stiver; I have felt her all over."

"Then she must have done ill these five years."

"Yes—and yet so handsome, too. But Pippa never plaited even."

"Nay, never—poor Pippa!"

So they muttered, plodding over the broken heavy ground, with the sound of the swollen river in their ears and their lanthorn lights gleaming through the steam of the rain. In the noise of the waters the child sobbed and screamed unheard. The man had tossed him over his shoulder as he carried the new-born lambs, only with a little less care.

They clambered up into the road and tramped through the slough of mud into the town. The woman had drawn nigh to the upper town by a dozen yards, when her foot had slipped, and she had reeled over to her death. But the feet of the shepherds were bare, and kept sure hold, like the feet of goats. They tramped on, quick, through the crooked streets and over the bridge; the river had run high, and along the banks, and on the flat roofs of the towers there were the lights burning of the men who watched for the flood. They heard how loud and swiftly the river was running as they went over the bridge and down into the irregular twisting street, and under the old noble walls of the lower village of the Lastra.

The one who carried the child opened a rickety door in the side of a tumbledown house, and climbed a steep stairway, and pushed his way into a room where children of all ages, and trusses of straw, and a pig, and a hen with her chickens, and a black crucifix, and a load of cabbage-leaves and maize-stalks, and a single lemon-tree in a pot, were all together nearly indistinguishable in the darkness. He tossed the child to a sturdy brown woman with fierce brows.

"Here, Nita, here is a young one I found in the fields. Feed it to-night, and to-morrow I will tell the priest and the others, and we shall get credit. It is near dead of cold already. No —I cannot stay—do you hear how the waters are out? Bruno is down below wanting me to help house the sheep."

He clattered away down the stairs, and joined his brother in the street.

"I told her nothing of Pippa," he said, in a whisper. "If she knew it were Pippa's not a drop of milk would he get to-night. As it is, it is a pretty little beggar; she will let him share

with Toto. She knows charity pleases Heaven. And—and—see here, Bruno, why need we speak of Pippa at all."

His brother stared at him in the murky gloom. "Why?—why we must fetch her in and bury her."

"The waters will do that before morning if we let them alone; that will spare us a deal of trouble, Bruno."

"Trouble—why?"

"Oh it is always trouble—the church and the law, and all the rest. Then you know the Syndic is such a man to ask questions. And nobody saw her but ourselves. And they may say we tumbled her over. She has come back poor, and all Signa knows that you struck at her with your knife on the day of the fair, and that she has been a disgrace and a weariness always. We might have trouble, Bruno."

"But the child?"

"Oh, the child! I have told Nita we picked it up lost in the fields. Why should we tell anybody to-night about Pippa? The poor soul is dead. No worse can come. Men do not hurt

dead women. And there is so much to do to-night, Bruno. We should see for our sheep on the other side now, and then stay down here. The devil knows what pranks Arno may not play to-night. In five hours I warrant you he will be out all over the country."

"But to leave her there—all alone—it is horrible!"

"How shall we show we did not push her there to her death?"

"But we did *not*."

"That is why they would all say we did. Everybody knows there was bad blood with us and Pippa: and most of all with you. Let the night go over, Bruno. We want the night to work in, and if she be there at day dawn, then we can tell. It will be time enough."

"Well—lie as you like," said the other, sullenly. "Let us get the sheep in anyhow."

So they went out to the open country again, through the storm of the west wind that was blowing the river back from the sea, so that it could not get out, and was driven up again between the hills, and so overflowed the lands

through which it travelled. The men worked hard and in earnest, housing their own sheep and driving their neighbours' cattle on rising knolls, or within church doors, or anywhere where they were safe from the water; and then came down again into the street towards midnight, where all the people were awake and astir watching Arno, and holding themselves ready to flee.

"You have got the ague, Bruno," said the man at the wine-shop, for his arm shook as he drank a draught.

"So would you if you had been up to your middle in water all the night like me," said the elder brother, roughly.

But it was not the water, they were too used to that. It was the thought of the woman dead all alone under the old sea road.

The night became a bitter black night. Up the valley the river was out, flooding the pastures far and near. Boats went and came, taking help, and bringing homeless families. Watchfires were burning everywhere. Bodies of drowned cattle drifted in by scores. There were stories that the great city herself was in flood. In such

a time every breath is a tale of terror, and every rumour grows instantly to giant proportions.

The upper town of Signa itself was safe. But was great peril for the low-lying Lastra. No one went to their beds. The priest prayed. The bells tolled. The men went to and fro in fear. The horrid loudness of the roaring waters drowned all other sounds.

When the morning broke, sullen and grey, and still beaten with storm, the cold dull waste of water stretched drearily on either side of the great bridge. The two brethren went with the crowd that looked from it eastward and westward.

The river had spread over the iron rails, and the grassy, broken ground, and the bushes of furze, and reached half way up to the rocks and the hill road above. The wind had changed, and was blowing in from the eastward mountains. The water rolled under its force with furious haste to the sea like a thing long imprisoned, and frantic with the joy of escape.

"It has taken Pippa," said the brothers, low to one another.

And they felt like men who have murdered a woman.

Not that it mattered of course. She was dead. And if not to the sea, then to the earth, all the dead must go,—into darkness, and forgotten of all.

CHAPTER IV.

THE brothers looked pale under their brown skins in the ashen light of the dawn.

But they had lost sheep like other folks, and so like other folks were pitied as they went back into the Lastra to get a mouthful of bread, after the sickly vigil of the night.

Bruno was an unwedded man, and could bear misfortune; but Lippo was a man early married, and having six young children to clamour round his soup-pot, and fight for the crusts of bread. He was pointed out amongst the crowd of sufferers, and was one of those who were pitied the most, and who was sure to get a good portion of the alms-giving and public relief.

"Give Bruno a cup of wine and a crust, Nita," said he, going up the stairs into the house of his wife. He lived there with her because her father, who was a cobbler, owned the place, and he himself best liked the life of the Lastra. The wife, too, having been a cobbler's daughter and grand-daughter, had been always used to see life from the half-door of the workshop; she would not become a mere contadina, hoeing and weeding and plaiting and carrying dung in a broad-leaved hat and a russet gown—not she, were it ever so; and Anita was one of those strong and fortunate women who always get their own way by dint of their power to make everyone wretched who crosses them.

"Leave me to speak," said Lippo, with a glance of meaning to his brother.

It was five in the morning, very cold, and still dusky. Anxiety was allayed, since the wind blew from the east, and the waters were sinking, though slowly.

Nita, who had been up all night on the watch, like the rest of the women, was boiling coffee in a tin-pot, and fanning the charcoal. The chil-

dren lay about as they chose on the floor. None of them had been put to bed, since at any moment they might have had to run for their lives.

Bruno looked round for Pippa's child. He did not see it.

"An awful night," said Lippo, kicking the pig out of a doze. "They do say the Vecchio bridge is down in Florence, and that the jewellers could not get out in time. I wish the gold and silver and stones would drift down here. All the Grève country is swamped. St. Giusto sticks up on his tower like a masthead. The cattle are drowned by herds. Whole stacks of wheat are against the piles, making hungry souls' mouths water; rotted and ruined; fine last year's grain; the good God is bitter-hard sometimes. Where is the baby I brought you last night, my woman?"

Nita pointed with her charcoal fan; her coffee was on the point of boiling.

The brothers looked where she pointed, to a nest of hay close to the hen and her chickens. The child lay there sound asleep, with his little

naked limbs curled up; and close against him was Toto, a yearling child also.

The elder brother turned away suddenly, and his body shook a little.

"You have never dried your clothes, Bruno," said his sister-in-law. "What a gaby a man is without a wife. Drink that, it is hot as hot. And what did you bring me that baby for—you and Lippo? You know whose brat it is, I suppose, and look out for the reward? I thought so, or I would not have given it house-room. Toto is more work than enough, so masterful as he is—and so ravenous."

"Nay," said Lippo, as with a sheepish apology for his weakness. "I know nothing of whose brat it is—I was just sorry for it; left in the soaking fields there; and I picked it up as I should pick up a lame lamb. What do you think of it, my dearest? does it look a poor child or a rich one, eh? Women are quick to judge."

The black brows of Nita lowered in wrath.

"Mercy of heaven! Who would have to do with such dolts as men? Just because the child was there you pick it up, never thinking of all

the hungry mouths half-fed at home! Shame on you. You are an unnatural brute. You would starve your own to nourish a stranger!"

"Nay, sweetest Nita!" murmured Lippo, coaxingly. "On such a night—and a child taken down by flood, too—not a living soul but would have done as I did. And who knows but he may be some rich father's child, and make our fortunes? Any way, the township will give us credit, and he can go to the Innocenti to-morrow, if we find no gain in him. Look what his things betoken."

"Oh, his things are rough-spun enough, and vile as can be," said his wife, in a fuming fury. "And would a rich man's child be out on flood? It is only the poor brats that the weather finds loose for it to play antics with; the child is a beggar's son, and this thing linked round his neck by a little string, is a thing you get at the fairs for a copper-bit."

The two men looked together at the locket that she held to them; it was of base-metal—a little poor round trumpery plaything. On it there was the one word in raised letters of Signa,

and inside a curl of soft light hair. That was all. They could none of them read, so the letters on the metal told them nothing. They stooped together over the sleeping child.

He was pretty and well made; he lay quite naked in the hay, and beside brown Toto looked like one of the little white marble children of old Mino. His lashes and his brows were black, but over his forehead hung little rings of soft, fair, crumpled hair.

Bruno turned away.

"She used to look just like that when she was a little child," he muttered to himself.

Lippo glanced round to see if his wife heard. But she was busy with the hen, who had got into a barrel of rice, and was eating treble her own price in the market at one meal.

"The brat must go," said she, turning and flogging the hen away. "As for a chance that it is a rich man's child, that is all rubbish. You make your bread with next year's corn. Chances like that are old wives' tales. What we have to do is to feed six hungry stomachs. You were a

fool to bring it here at all. But to dream one should keep it! Holy Mary!"

"Holy Mary would say, keep it," said Bruno, munching his crust.

"Maybe it is your own, Bruno. Those that hide can find," said his sister-in-law, sharply. "The child shall pack to-day. I shall go and tell them at the guard-house. Toto is more than enough, and as for that locket, you can get such trash as that at any fair for a couple of figs. That goes for nothing.

"Well, well, keep the poor baby till noon, and I will see what the Curato says. It is always well to see what he says," her husband answered her hurriedly, and afraid of the gathering storm on Bruno's face.

Bruno was passionate, tempestuous, and weak, and the quieter and subtler brother ruled him with ease whilst seeming to obey. But for turning the baby of dead Pippa's to public maintenance—Lippo had a foreboding in him that in this matter his brother would be too strong for him.

He hurried away out of pretext of the labour

awaiting them in the inundated country, not without misgiving that the darkest suspicions as to the fatherhood of the foundling were awakening in the jealous soul of his wife.

They went straight to the edge of the river, and got out their old black boat, with its carved prow and tricoloured tiller, and pulled down the current of the now quiet water to see with the rest what they could help to save from the flotsam and jetsum of the flood. Whole districts lay under water, and the river was full of dead cats and dogs, drowned sheep, floating pipkins and wine-casks, bales of hay, carcases of cows, and broken bits of furniture from many a ruined farmstead and peasant's hut laid low.

"Listen," said the elder brother suddenly, when the boat was fairly out from the bank, and with his hooked pole he drew in a spinning-wheel with its hank of flax drenched like a drowned girl's hair. "Listen to me, Lippo. Pippa's son must not go to charity. Do you hear?"

"I hear. But we are poor men, and Pippa was——"

"That is neither here nor there," said Bruno, with his dark brows meeting. "She never asked alms of us, nor house-room, nor did anything except go to her death just as sheep tumble over a rock. The baby must not go to the parish. We did faulty enough—letting her go down flood with never an office of church said over her. And who knows—who knows—she might not be quite dead, after all."

"Nita will not keep him—that is sure," said the younger quickly. "Look, that is Barcelli's old red cow. You may know her by the spot on her side."

"Would she keep him if she were paid?"

Lippo's eyes lighted with joy, but he bent a grave face over his pole as he raked in a floating oil-flask by its wicker coat.

"I doubt if she would. She has a deal of trouble with Toto. And who is there to pay, pray? We know no more than the cow there who the man was—you know that."

"I will pay."

"You!"

"Yes; I will pay the child's keep."

"Holy angels! And you who were for ever at words and blows with Pippa, and stabbed at her even for being too gay!"

"I will pay," said Bruno.

Lippo rowed on in silence some moments.

"How much?" he asked at last.

"I will give you half all I get."

Lippo's white teeth showed themselves in a sudden smile. His brother gained a good deal in corn and oil and beans and hay and wine, being on good land, and being a man who worked and got the uttermost out of the soil that he shared with his master, and Lippo was often pinched by his father-in-law Baldo the cobbler, and half famished by his wife, and was a true, thrifty son of the soil, and knew the worth of a hundredth part of a copper coin as well as any man between sea and mountain.

"Half all you get, and we to keep the child?" he said absently, and as with reluctance. "But what can we say to Nita?"

"You are never at a loss for good lying, Lippo."

Lippo smiled; his vanity was flattered.

"I never lie to Nita. She always finds one out. Only in the matter of Pippa's son I hid the truth to please you. She never would nurse the child if she guessed. But as for making her keep him, say what one will, it will be impossible —impossible, my dear."

"It must be," said Bruno, withdrawing his hand from the tiller and bringing it down with violence on the boat's side, while his eyes flashed with blue fire as the lightning flashes most summer nights over the blue hills of his own Signa. "It must be. I will pay. I will give you half I get. Good harvests—you know what that is. But Pippa's child shall not go to the parish while I have an arm to drive a plough through the ground or to guide over the field. Settle it with your wife your own way. But Pippa's child shall grow up amongst us."

"Dear Bruno, to please you I will try," said gentle Lippo with a sigh. "But we have brats too many in the house, and you know what Nita's 'Nay' can be."

"Nay or yea, the child stays," said Bruno.

"The half of everything," murmured Lippo,

as he bent to his oars and passed by a dog howling on the top of its floating kennel to reach his pole to a butcher's basket of meat that was tossing amongst the rubbish.

But Bruno, having the tiller, pushed first to reach the dog.

"It is only a cur," said Lippo.

Bruno pulled the dog into the boat.

In the Lastra, and in the town, and in all the country round or near Signa, the brothers were known as well as the mass-bells of the churches. The Signa people thought that Bruno the contadino was a bad man enough, ready with his knife and often in a brawl, and too often seen at fairs and with other men's wives on feast-days. Lippo they liked and respected, and everybody spoke him fair; and he would keep the peace most beautifully when men got angry in the street before his house-door.

They were both handsome men, and could neither of them read, and believed in their priest and their paternoster, and had never been beyond the mountains around Signa, except now and then—Bruno with his bullocks, and Lippo in

a donkey-cart to buy leather—down the Valdarno into the Lily City.

Bruno lived on the wild hillside, amongst the thyme and the myrtle and the gorze and the grass-cropping sheep and the ever-singing nightingales. Lippo dwelt down in the street, doing as little as he could, and by preference nothing, in the smell of his wife's frying and in the sound of her father's little hammer; rowing out his boat when there was any chance for it to pay, and seeing after the few sheep that the shoemaker kept above the bridge. They had been born within a year of one another—sons of peasants and workers in the fields. Bruno had stayed on the old land where his fathers had had rights of the soil uncounted generations. Lippo had loitered down love-making into the Lastra, and had married very early the daughter of well-to-do old Baldo.

There had been several sons after them. Two had been killed as soldiers, and others had died in infancy by various strokes of evil chance; and the youngest of them all had been Pippa—Pippa, whose body was gone out on the flood

to the sea with never a prayer said over her. Beautiful, fierce, wayward, wilful, fire-mouthed Pippa, who had run over the hills like a lizard, and who had had saucy words on her tongue as a rose has its thorns, and who had had all Signa gazing after her for her beauty when she had walked singing like a cherub in the wake of the banners of the church.

Not that she had ever cared much for the church,—poor Pippa.

She had always been quarrelsome and self-willed and headstrong; and had flouted her lovers, and been petulant to her own hindrance, and as wild as a hawk, and provoking—yes, provoking, past the endurance of any man who was a brother and nothing more. She would never sit quiet and spin; she would never keep her eyes on her tress of straw as other girls did; if she milked the cow she would upset the pail just out of wantonness, and would laugh and dance to see their rage when she let the pigs run in amongst her brother's plot of green peas. Yes, certainly, she was provoking; a bad girl, even though loving at heart; no one was to blame that

she had gone away without a word and come back so, with a child at her breast, to find her death the night of the flood.

A self-willed foolish girl and with wrong-doing ingrained in her—as for patience, who could be very patient with a woman that let the pigs in amongst your peas just when green peas fetched their weight in silver? And then she had such a tongue too, the little shrew—true, she did not bear malice, and would not growl, growl, growl for hours together as Nita would, and Nita's mother, thinking it the only way to manage men; true, she was a generous soul, and would let a beggar have her dinner, though meals were meagre on the hills; and when one had beaten her till she was blue she would not tell, but say she had fallen from the ladder trimming the vines, or that the bees had stung her. Still a wilful, quarrelsome, pettish thing; no man could be blamed for her ill-hap nor for her end. So Lippo said to himself when his brother had gone up to the hills, and he himself left his boat to go down the narrow street homeward, pondering on Pippa's child and on what he should say to Nita.

As he went up the stairs he settled the lie to his mind's content, and entered the room looking with his fairest faith out of his clear brown eyes.

"I am going to be frank with you, Nita," he said, and then he sat down and lied so prettily, that if there be a Father of Lies he must quite have rejoiced to hear him.

Nita listened as well as a woman can listen—that is, interrupting twenty times and getting up to do some irrelevant thing twice twenty.

"Bruno's son!" she cried at last.

"Hush! The children will hear," said Lippo. "It is as I tell you. Only Bruno must not know that you know, because he is so afraid that red haired Roma whom he is courting should hear of it. But you see why I closed with him, Nita. It will be a good thing for us. We can eat like fatting pigs off Bruno's land. Nothing to prevent us. And it is hill land, you know, and his share comes to a good bit, taking fair weather and foul. And then, besides that, we shall have credit in the Lastra, for Bruno never will say a word, and the curato and all the place

may as well think the child a foundling as not. A good deed smells sweet in the neighbours' nostrils, and a good name is like a blest palm. We must tell your father, or he will grumble at their being a seventh mouth. But nobody else need know. The brat will grow up with the others and we shall seem kind, that is all."

"To think of its being Bruno's!" cried Nita, with a clap of her big brown hands. "Did I not say so, now? Did I not jeer him as he looked at it asleep? Oh-ho! Who can deceive me? Never you try, Lippo, more!"

"You can see through a millstone;" replied Lippo, with an embrace of her. "Only an ass can ever seek to blind you, and that is why I told you the truth, though Bruno would have screened it. He is so afraid of the creature he goes to now ever knowing—you understand."

"The child will be a bother," said Anita, remembering the kicks and cuffs with whose best administration she could scarce manage to keep the peace amongst her brood or their hands ever out of the soup-pot.

"Oh, no," said Lippo, shrugging his shoulders,

"where there are six there may as well be seven. He will tumble up with the others. We are to have half of all Bruno gets, and I can guess to a stalk, you know, what an acre of wheat is worth or what an olive or a fig tree bears. No fattore would outwit me. I was not bred out on the fields for nothing. Half of everything you know, Nita. That will mean a good deal in good seasons. I am very hungry, carina. Could you not fry something in oil, nice and tempting for one? An artichoke, now, or a blackbird?"

Nita grumbled at the extravagance, but being in a good humour went downstairs and across the way and brought over some artichokes and fried them and ate them with her husband, the children being sent to make dust pies and castles in the sun on the stones below, old Baldo keeping an eye on them over his half-door.

Lippo and his wife ate their artichokes, and drank a little wine with them.

Pippa's son cried unnoticed in his nest of hay, and sobbed out his one little word for mother, which was like the moan of a little unfledged bird left in the snow.

"We will bring him up to help himself," said Lippo, with his mouth filled with the fried eggs and oil.

The child sobbed on, and felt for his mother's breast, and only had his small soft rosy hands torn with the thorns and pricked with the burrs and briars of the sun-dried hay.

CHAPTER V.

MEANWHILE Bruno went on up the hills; up the same old road which had felt Pippa's footsteps on it the night before; with the river underneath it, and on the other side the mountains rising, with the olives and vines about their sides, and on their summits old watchtowers and fortresses, and dusky woods of ilex, and cloudy masses of stone-pine, that sent their strong odour down the valley a score of miles.

Bruno went on his way, looking neither right nor left. He went over the ground so often, and he had seen it all from the year he was born; always this and never anything else; and long familiarity dulls the sense of beauty, even where such sense has been awakened, and

Bruno's never had been—except for a woman's looks.

He strode on, not looking up nor looking back; a straight-limbed, swarthy, fine-built peasant, of thirty years or more, with the oval face of his country, and broad, black, luminous eyes, soft and contemplative, like the eyes of the ox, when the rage was not alight in them.

He did not look round, because peasants do not look up from the soil; and he did not look back, because he had no care to see the spot where he had kneeled down in the wet grass by the broken bushes, with the noise of the river in his ears.

He went up the sea-road some way, and then quitted it and ascended to the left. The estate to which he belonged was on the side of a spur of the mountains, that turns to Signa, and faces straight down the valley, and whose wine is named as famous in the Bacco in Toscana of Redi.

There are beautiful hills in this country, steep and bold, and formed chiefly of limestone and sandstone, covered all over with gum-

cistus and thyme, and wild-roses and myrtle, with low growing laurels and tall cypresses, and boulders of stone, and old thorn trees, and flocks of nightingales always, and the sad-voiced little owl that was beloved of Shelley.

Bruno's farmstead was on one of these hills; half the hill was cultured, and the other half was wild; and on its height was an old, grey, mighty place, once the palace of a cardinal, and where there now dwelt the steward of the soil on which Bruno had been born.

His cottage was a large, low, white building with a red roof, and a great arched door, and a sun-dial on the wall, and a group of cypresses beside, and a big walnut tree before it. There was an old well with some broken sculpture; some fowls scratching under the fig boughs; a pig hunting for roots in the black bare earth; behind it stretched the wild hill-side, and in front a great slope of fields and vineyards; and far below them in the distance the valley and the river and the bridge, with the high crest of the upper Signa, and the low lying wall-towers of the Lastra on either side of the angry waters.

Bruno did not look back at it all. He saw the sun rise over it, and the beautiful pale light steal up, and up, and up, and up, whenever he rose to his work in the day-dawn. But it was nothing at all to him. When now and then a traveller or a painter strayed thither, and said it was beautiful, Bruno smiled, glad because it was his own country—that was all.

He went into his cold, quiet, desolate house, and sat down for a minute's rest; he was tired. There was no one to greet him. He did everything for himself. He had no neighbours. The nearest contadino lived a mile down beyond the fields which in summer were a sea of maize and a starry world of fire-flies; and the old palace was some distance higher on the crest, where the gorze grew thickest, and the mountain moss clustered about the roots of the stone-pines.

Here—in the long, low, rambling dwelling, with the sun-dial on its wall, and the great archways underneath it, and the stacks of straw before it—there had been nine of them once. Now Bruno lived there alone.

He sat down a minute on the settle, and thought. Thinking was new work to him. He never thought at all, except of the worm in the ripening wheat, or the ticks in the flock's fleeces. The priest did his thinking for him. What use was it to pay a priest for having opinions if one had to think for one's self as well?

But he sat and thought now.

Poor Pippa! what a little, ruddy, pretty thing she was lying in her white swaddling bands, when he was a big rough boy twelve years old, with bare feet and chest, who used to come in from the fields hungry and footsore, and feel angry to see the last-come child in his mother's arms, getting all her care and caresses.

He bore Pippa a grudge from her birth.

They were all boys, rough and tumble together, share and share alike; and then one summer morning the girl came, and their mother never seemed the same to them again—never any more. The little girl, with a face like a bud of the red rose laurel, seemed to be all she thought about—or so they fancied; and anything good that could be got, honey, or a drop of new milk, or a little

white loaf from the town, or an apricot from the fattoria, was always set aside for Pippa; pretty, saucy, noisy, idle Pippa, who was more often in mischief than they were, but never got, as they did, a thrashing and a wish that the devil might come and fetch away all naughty children.

There had been times when he had hated Pippa, hated her from the first day he saw her lying on her mother's bosom, with her little red mouth, clinging as a bee does at a flower, to the night when he had scolded her for dancing with any fool that asked her, and then she had mocked him about a dead love, and he had struck at her with his knife, and the people had dragged him off her, all blind with rage and shame at his own misdoing; and the blood had spouted out up from her neck, and stained the lace she wore as red as a goldfinch's feathers.

He had hated her always.

It seemed to him now that he had been like a brute to her—poor, pretty, brown-eyed, happy, self-willed thing, who had been spoilt from her babyhood upward.

Lippo remembered how provoking she had been, and justified himself, as he went home through the Lastra.

But Bruno forgot it, and only reproached himself. He had always been rough and fierce and moody with her—oh yes, no doubt. If he had been patient with her—he twelve years older, too—she might never have run away from her home on the hill, and borne that nameless child, and gone to her death on the old sea-road.

No doubt he had done wrong by her; had been too severe and tyrannous, and had helped to make the cottage distasteful to her after their mother had died and he had become master, and had tried to shut her in, as a thrush is shut in a wicker cage.

He forgot all her faults—poor dead Pippa—and he remembered all his own. Liberal natures will err thus to themselves; and Bruno, with all his evil ways, was liberal as the sun and winds.

Poor Pippa!

He saw her as he had seen her standing out in the light on the hill, with her little brown hands

plaiting the straw all unevenly, and her bow-like mouth gay with laughter at some piece of mischief sweet to her as a fig in summer. She had used to look so pretty, with her arch eyes shining under her great straw penthouse of a hat, and her supple, slim shape, in brown and red, like a firefly, standing up as a poppy does against the corn on the amber light of the evening sky, here where the hill was just the same, and only she was a thing that was gone for ever and ever and ever.

Bruno shut his eyes not to see the hill. But he could not shut out his thoughts. He had been a brute to her. It stirred and grew in him; this mute remorse, which Lippo would have laughed at, and which had been awake ever since he had gone about his business as the river rose, and left the dead woman alone to drift down with the flood.

She was dead, of course, and it could hurt her no more to be swept out to the salt sea-pools westward than to be lowered into the earth in a coffin. Still Bruno, if he had gone straight to the priest and told him, and had let the Church

sorrow over and bury her, would not have been tormented by the thought of her as he was now. Now, in a curious kind of half stupid way, he felt as if he had found her and had killed her.

There had been war between him and Pippa always; and though it had shocked him a little to find her lying there lifeless in the dark, yet he had not cared much at first. But since he had forsaken her to the will of the waters, in the vague fear of that nameless trouble which his brother had threatened him with as possible, Bruno—a brave man all his days—felt a coward; and with the tingling shame of that new craven sense came a self-reproach in which any rough word and fierce act of his life against the lost creature rose in judgment against him.

Poor Pippa!

After all, what had her faults been? Only mirth and over-eagerness for pleasure, and a quick tongue, and a love of the sunshine idly spent amongst fruits and flowers whilst others were working. These were all.

She had been truthful and generous of temper,

and never unwilling to forgive. Nay, though he had struck at her with his open blade that fair-night, she had called out to the people not to hurt him for it; and when she had left the hillside that very summer—no one knew for whither nor with whom—did she not tell an old woman, who alone saw her going through the millet at break of day with a bundle, "Say to my brothers I am not angry any more; they have been unkind to me, but I have been troublesome, and said hot words very often; and I will pray for them, if that will do any good: only tell them not to try to bring me back, because we never are at peace together"?

Poor Pippa!

He shut his eyes against the sunlight; but, shut them as he would with both hands, he saw her as he had seen her last, coming through the beanflowers, with the long evening shadows and the little golden fireflies seeming to run before her; when he had turned across the fields and avoided her because of the thrust with the knife, which she had never spoken of, and of which he was half ashamed and half defiant,

and which therefore he would never admit that he regretted, living on in silence with her under the same roof, trusting to chance.

And chance came—the chance that one summer morning the bed of Pippa was empty, and old Viola, coming in with a sheaf of green cane for her donkey, told them how she had met the girl, and of her farewell words.

Shut his eyes as he would, he saw her so, amongst the purple beanflowers that night when his heart had swelled a little at sight of her, and he had been half inclined to tell her he was sorry for that blow, and then had felt the pride rise in him, and had said to himself that the girl had deserved it—disobeying him, and then jesting at him—and so had struck across the rustling corn, and let her go without a word.

And now she was dead—gone out on the flood to the sea; and he had never told her that he had been sorry for the stab, and never could tell her now.

Would God tell her? or any one of the saints?

Bruno wondered. He felt as if that dead woman whom the river had got stood for ever between him and all the hosts of heaven.

He was a strong man, and his emotions and his intelligence were both unawakened, and his life was much like that of his own plough bullocks; but he shuddered through all his limbs as he rose up from the wooden settle and faced the day. Work with the labourer is an instinct, as watching is the house-dog's; and pain may stifle it for a moment, but no more.

He went out and unloosed the bar of the stable-doors, and brought out his oxen, and muzzled them and yoked them together, and drove them out over the steep slanting fields that ran upward and downward, and were intersected by lines of maples and mulberries with the leafless vines clinging to them, and by watercourses cut deep that the rain might be borne down the mountain side, and by wild hedges of briony and rose and arbutus, with here and there winter-red leaves of creepers that the winds had forgotten to blow away.

It was a grey morning, with heavy white mists

lying over all the valley down below; and on the high hills it was very cold. Bruno drove his meek large-eyed beasts through the black earth with a heavy heart.

He seemed always to see Pippa as she had used to come, when their father lived, and she was a child, with a black loaf and a flask of wine, out to them on the hill in the ploughing time, and stroked the bullocks, and put round their leathern frontlets gay wreaths of anemones, purple and red and blue, or the berries of the beautiful corbezzolo.

And now she was dead—stone dead—like the mouse the share killed in the furrow.

The bullocks, well used to goad and curse, turned their broad foreheads and looked at him with luminous fond eyes: he was so gentle with them—they were grateful, but they wondered why.

Bruno ploughed all day, and the wind blew up from the sea, and he felt as if it were blowing her long wet hair against him.

"I will do good by the child, so help me ——, and perhaps they will tell her in heaven," he

said to himself, as he went to and fro up and down the shelving fields underneath the lines of the leafless trees.

"Perhaps they will tell her in heaven?" he thought, as he went over the heavy wet clods in the mist.

CHAPTER VI.

Brunone Marcillo, always known as Bruno, did what all his people had always done for seven hundred centuries and more.

They had been vassals and spearmen in the old warlike times, and well-to-do contadini ever afterwards; giving their sons, when need arose, to die in the common cause of the native soil, but otherwise never stirring off their own hill-side; good husbandmen, bold men, fierce haters, honest neighbours, keeping their women-kind strictly, and letting their males have as much license as was compatible with unremitting and patient labour in all seasons.

They were a race remarkable for physical beauty—a beauty that is strictly national; the

dark straight-browed classic beauty which Giotto has put in his Garden of Olives, and Signorelli given to his noble Prophets.

They had always intermarried with mountain races like their own, or taken wives from the Lastra households, where the ancient blood ran pure. The father of Brunone and Lippo had done otherwise; he had taken a work-girl of the city, a pretty feckless thing, whom he had seen one market night that he had strayed into the Loggia theatre, when a good harvest had put too much loose cash in his pockets, and the humours of Cimarosa's *Nemici Generosi* had been making him laugh till he cried.

The girl had become to him a good wife enough, nobody had denied that; but she was not of the stern stuff that the Marcillo house-wives always had been, with their busts of Ceres and their brows of Juno, their arms that could guide the oxen and their heads that could balance a wine-barrel.

She was timid, and some said false, though that was never proved, and she had not the

hill-born strength of mind and body that these people who had lived nigh a thousand years in the same air possessed.

Her second son, Filippo, or Lippo, inherited her constitution, and with it her supplicating caress of manner and her timidity—perhaps her falseness too; but the Lastra did not think so; the Lastra was fond of Lippo, though he had deserted the ways of his fathers, and dwelt in an idleness not altogether creditable and altogether alien to the habits of his race, who had always been used to labour together, father and sons, and often grandsons, all under the same roof and on the same fields, generation after generation.

When the large family dwindled down to the one man, it was out of custom to leave so much land to a solitary labourer. But Brunone Marcillo was a favourite with his master, and one of the best husbandmen in the province; besides he was sure to marry and fill the house, they thought, so he was left undisturbed, and the land suffered nothing; for though he loved his pleasure in a wild lawless way, and took fierce fits of it at times, he was devoted to his home-

stead and his work, and loved his birthplace with that fast-rooted love of the Tuscan which makes the little red roof under the red waning skies, on the solitary upland, or in the silent marsh, or amidst the blue-flowered fields of flax, or above the thyme-covered, wind-blown hills by the sea, more precious and more lovely than any greater fate or fairer gifts elsewhere.

All alone on his little farm Bruno became a man well to do, and who could have put money by had he not loved women so well—so they said.

It was a broad rich piece of land that went with the dwelling house he occupied. He grew wheat, and maize, and beans, and artichokes, and had several sturdy fig-trees that yielded richly, and noble olives that numbered their hundred years, and the vines that marched with his corn were amongst the best in the Signa country.

The half of all its produce was his, according to the way of the land and the provisions of custom, and the house was a better one than most of its degree; and the fields that were his lay well on the open hillside, sun-swept, as was

wanted by vines and grain both, but sheltered from cold winds by the jutting out of the quarried rocks and the woods of ilex and pine that were above.

Bruno was a laborious workman, and was skilled in field labour; he knew how to make an ear of barley bear double, and how to keep blight away, and the fly from the vine.

He could not read; he could not write; his notions of God were shut up in a little square coloured picture, framed and hung up over the gateway into his fields to bring a blessing there; his idea of political duty was comprised in hating any one who taxed him, and being ready to shoot any one who raised the impost on grain; but he was a husbandman after Virgil's own heart; he wanted no world beyond the waving of his corn, and if a steer were sick, or when the grapes were ripe, he took no sleep, but watched all night, loving his cattle and his fruits as poets their verse or kings their armies.

On the whole Bruno led a contented and prosperous life, and if he had not been so ready with

his wrath, might have been welcome in all households; and if he had not been over fond of those fairs in all the little towns where wandering players set up their little music booths, and of the women that he found there, and of the license that is always to be had by any man whose money-bag has its mouth open and its stomach filled, might also have become a very wealthy man in his own way. But he was fierce, and every one feared him, and he was improvident, and every one fleeced him. And he was lax and lawless in his loves, and had a dangerous name in the country side amongst the mothers of maidens.

So that he of all men had had no title to be hard upon Pippa: and yet hard he had been always.

The most amorous men and the wildest are usually the most exacting of virtue and modesty in their own women.

He had always hated her: yes, honestly hated her he told himself; and as she grew up into girlhood, and they were shut alone in the same house, always opposed one to another, Pippa's

idleness, and sauciness, and rebellion against homekeeping, and passion for dancing, and straying and idling, infuriated him against her more and more with every day that dawned.

Bruno, with all his excesses, never neglected or slurred over his labour. The land and its needs were always first with him. He would have had his sister one of those maidens, numerous around him, who asked nothing better than the daily round of household and field duties; who could reap as well as a man; who could harness an ox and guide him; and who were busy from dusk of dawn to nightfall hoeing, drawing water, spinning, plaiting, shelling beans, rearing chickens, drying tomatoes, setting cauliflowers, thinning fruit-trees, winding silk off the cocoons, and went to bed with tired limbs and a light conscience, never dreaming of more pleasure than a stroll on a feast-day with a neighbour, or a new white linen skirt for some grand church function.

"Why was not Pippa like that?" he had asked himself, angrily, ten thousand times, instead of a girl that would hardly do as much

as tie up a few bunches of carnations or S. Catherine lilies for the market.

The Marcillo women had always been reared in strong usefulness and in stern chastity. This handsome, buoyant, gay, insolent, idle thing offended him in every way and at every turn.

He would have married her away willingly, and dowered her well, to the first honest fellow; but Pippa had laughed in the faces of all the neighbours' sons who had wanted her to wed with them. She was in no hurry, she said.

She made all the countryside in love with her, and then turned her back on it with a saucy laugh, and the sunshine in her face was never merrier then whenever she heard that two young fellows had quarrelled about her, and drawn knives on one another, and set all the Lastra talking.

So that when Pippa disappeared many were glad, and none very sorry. Bruno smarted with shame—that was all.

Indeed, when she was gone away, the townsfolk talked of a foreigner, a student and painter, who had been seen with the girl at

evening on the road, or by the river, or in the shadow of the old Lastra bastions; a young man with a delicate face, and a playful way, and a gay tongue, who had wandered on foot, with his knapsack and colours, down from the Savoy country and into Tuscany, and had danced often with Pippa, and had been met with her after sunset, on the hillside.

But none had told Bruno till too late, being afraid of his too ready knife if a hint were taken wrong, and he had known nothing of these tales until Pippa had vanished, and even then the neighbours were slow to rouse his wrath by telling the scanty rumours they had heard.

Even the young man's name the people had not known; a youngster lightly come and lightly gone, whom no one took account of, till of a sudden they noticed that he had been unseen since Pippa had been missing. He had lodged a little while above a wine shop, and gone up and down the river, and to and from the old white town, painting; and had danced at the fairs and learned to strum on a guitar, and eaten piles of fruit, and been restless and graceful as a firefly:

that was all; and only a few women had observed as much as that.

It told nothing to Bruno; and, besides, if they had told him a hundred times as much, he could have done nothing; a contadino is rooted to the soil, and it no more would have seemed possible to him to travel into far countries than to have used his ploughshare for a boat, or driven his steers to turn the sea like sod.

People had hardly ever thought what Pippa's fate had been. If anything great had come to her, the countryside would have heard of it.

In these little ancient burghs and hillside villages, scattered up and down between mountain and sea, there is often some boy or girl, with a more wonderful voice, or a more beautiful face, or a sweeter knack of song, or a more vivid trick of improvisation than the others; and this boy or girl strays away some day with a little bundle of clothes, and a coin or two, or is fetched away by some far-sighted pedlar in such human wares, who buys them as bird fanciers buy the finches from the nets; and then, years

and years afterwards, the town or hamlet hears indistinctly of some great prima donna, or of some lark-throated tenor, that the big world is making happy as kings, and rich as kings' treasurers, and the people carding the flax or shelling the chestnuts say to one another, "That was little black Lià, or that was our old Momo;" but Momo or Lià the village or the vinefield never sees again.

If anything great had come in that sort of way to Pippa, Signa would have heard of it. There is always someone to tell of a success —always someone to bring word, so that the friends may gird up their loins, and go and smell out the spoil, claim the share of it, and remind Momo, as he comes out of a palace, of his barefoot babyhood, and call to Lià's mind the time when she, who now quarrels with princes, was glad of the day's bran-bread.

But none had ever said anything of Pippa. She had dropped out of sight and remembrance, and no one had asked what had become of her, though the girl had been beautiful in her way, darkly, brightly, roughly, tenderly, capriciously beautiful,

like the barley blowing from shade to sun—only, no man ever would stand her temper, said the women.

That had been conceded everywhere: and her brothers had been pitied.

Between the day that she had gone over the fields with the farewell word to old Viola and the night that she had stumbled to her death, over the sea, in the dark road, no one had ever heard or known anything of Pippa.

But it was not because her story was a strange one; it was only because it was so common. Mystery is to the tongue of the storyteller as butter to the hungry mongrel; but what is simple is passed over by human mouths as daisies by the grazing horse.

Her tale was very simple.

That fair-day in Signa she had been so resolute to go to the merry-making, because of the stranger, who would whirl to the thrum of the mandolin as a bat does when a lamp burns, and who would come through the beanflowers to see her plait straw when her brothers were out in the fields, and who was gay like herself, and

passionate, and young, and found but one song worth the singing when the sun went down and the fireflies burned.

Then there had come Bruno's blow, and the stab in her breast—and all a man's natural passion of sympathy had been aroused, and all a girl's terror of her fierce brother's worse vengeance, if only the truth were known.

And so her lover took her with him when he went back to France, while the beanflowers faded and died; and Pippa loved him like a dog:—poor Pippa! who always having been so saucy of tongue, and stubborn of neck, and proud, and full of petulance, clung like a vine, and crouched like a spaniel, and trembled like a leaf, when once she loved, as all such women do.

Thus the broad shining Tuscan fields were changed for streets of Paris, and the hills of olive for the roofs of lead; and the song of the grilli for the beat of the drum; and the fires of the lucciole for the shine of the gas; and Pippa, a thing of sun and wind, and seablown air, fresh as a fruit and free as a bird, was cooped up in

a student's attic, with the roar of the traffic for ever on her ear, and the glistening zinc of her neighbour's house-roofs for ever before her casement.

He did what he could for her.

He was a landscape painter and a student of Paris. He had a beautiful face, great dreams, ardent passions, and no money, except such little pittance as an old doting mother, a widow in a little Breton hamlet, could send him, by pinching herself of oil and bread. For three months he worshipped Pippa; and this scarlet poppy from the Tuscan wheat glowed on a hundred canvases in a hundred forms; and then of course he tired. Then, of course, the poppy ceased to be a magical flower of passion and of sleep; it seemed only a red bubble, blowing useless in the useful corn.

He thought he hid this from her; but she felt, before he knew, it. Women will always do so who love their lives out in a year, as Pippa did.

The Mimis, and Bibis, and Libis around her were happy enough, with a pot of mignonette

for their garden, and a theatre for their heaven, and a Sunday in the woods now and then for their liberty. Besides, they could all chatter with one another, and change their lovers, if need was, and sing little triplets, like little canaries, as they sat sewing at rose-coloured ball-skirts, or twirling up their cambric mock-rosebuds.

But Pippa was in exile. Pippa had the woman's worst crime of loving over much. Pippa had brought nothing with her but her own full, fierce, fond, little heart of storm. Pippa felt her heart break in this cage.

Pippa could not read. Pippa knew nothing that he talked of, except when he told her that he loved her, and men get weary of saying this too long to the same woman. Pippa could only plait straw—and that not very well; and no one wanted it in Paris.

Pippa, when in the dance-gardens, one night, struck with a knife at a man who would have kissed her, and wounded him sorely, and when hidden away from the perils that arose, could not be made to see she had done wrong, because Bruno had stabbed her, and she had borne him no

malice, and here she was on her just defence, and had done right, she thought. Then her lover grew wroth with her, and Pippa, whose spirit was broken, like that of all fiery creatures when they love, could only sob and kiss his feet; and then, —he went elsewhere.

Then came hard winters, and a crying child, and the garret was cold and empty, and debt stole in like a ghost, and hunger with him, and Pippa sold her pearls—real pearls, fished up from the deep sea by coral divers, and worn at fairs and feasts by her with the honest pride of the true Tuscan peasant. Only she never let him know the pearls were sold. She made him think that it was one of his own pictures which had brought them that little heap of gold.

But that money lasted very little time, and the child sickened and died, and the summer came; but that would not banish hunger; and Pippa lost her beauty, and her rich, round, radiant look, and her great brown eyes got a frightened look—because he so seldom kissed her now, and sometimes would give her a little gesture like that which a man gives when he sweeps away quickly

with his elbow some dead flower or dropped ashes. Yet still he was good to her—oh, yes—he was good. Pippa told herself so a thousand times a day. He never beat her. Pippa, once so saucy and so proud, was grateful. Love is thus.

Then another winter came, the third one—that was hardest. They had nothing to eat for many days. They sold their clothes and their bed-linen, and even the copper pot in which their food was stewed; and she had no more pearls.

Pippa had nothing either of her beauty left but her straight brows and her big, lustrous eyes. She was no longer even a bright bubble, as the field poppy was. She was a little dusky peasant, pale and starved, and blown amongst the snow like a frozen redbreast.

"It is the pictures he cares for," she had learned to say to herself. She had found this out. She got to hate them, the senseless things of wood and colour, that cost so much money, and now had all his looks, all his longings, all his memories, all his regrets.

She hated even those canvas likenesses of herself, that had blossomed into being with the

purple beanflowers, under the summer suns of Signa, when their passion was new-born.

Pippa loved her lover with the same love, fierce, and faithful, and dog-like, and measureless, as when he had first taken her small head within his hands, and kissed her on the eyes and mouth.

But it was a love that could understand nothing: least of all, change.

One day, in the bitterness of the mid-winter, after weeks of hunger, and the shameful straits of the small debts that make the commonest acts and needs of daily life a byword and reproach, she woke to find herself alone.

There were twenty gold pieces on the bed, long stript of all its covering, and a written line or two. She took the paper to the woman of the house below, who read it to her. It told her that he was gone to Dresden to copy a famous picture for a wealthy man; he sent her all the sum they had advanced him, and said a little phrase or two of sorrow and of parting, and of hope of better days, and of the unbearable pain of such beggary as they had

known. He spoke vaguely of some union in the future.

Pippa cast the twenty gold pieces into the mud of the street, where the poor scrambled and clutched and fought for them. She understood that she was forsaken.

All he had said was true; but the great truth was what he had not said. Pippa was ignorant of almost everything; but this she knew enough to know.

That night they took her to a madhouse, and cut close the long brown braids of her hair, and fastened together the feet that had used to fly, as the wind flies, through the paths of the vines in summer.

Poor Pippa! She had always plaited ill; the women had always said so.

In half-a-year's time she gave birth to a child, and her reason came back to her, and after a time they let her go. She promised to go to her own country.

But she cheated them, and went to Dresden. She had kept that name in her mind. She got there as best she could, begging on the way or

working; but of work she knew so little, and of workers there are so many. She carried the child all the way. Sometimes people were good to her; sometimes they were bad; oftenest they were neither one nor the other. Indifference is the invincible giant of the world.

When she reached Dresden it was summer. The city was empty.

With much trouble she heard of him. The copy was done, and he was gone back to France.

"Perhaps he does not want you. If he wanted you he would not leave you," said a comely woman, who was sorry for her, but who spoke as she thought, giving her a roll of bread under a tree in the street.

"Perhaps he does not want me," thought Pippa. The words awoke her memory. She had been left by him. He would not have left her unless he had been tired—tired of all the poverty and all the pain, and of the passion that had lost its glow, as the poppy loses its colour once being reaped with the wheat.

There was a dull fierce pain in her. There were times when she wished to kill him. Then

at other times she would see a look of his face in the child's, and would break into an anguish of weeping.

Anyway, she set backward to find him.

Carrying the child, that grew heavier with each day, and travelling sometimes with gipsies and vagrants, and mountebanks, but more often alone, and begging her bread on the way, she got back into France after many months. She had got stupid and stunned with fatigue and with pain. She had lost all look of youth, but she kept the child as fresh as a rose; and now and then she would smile, because his mouth laughed like her lover's.

Back into Paris she went. The strange fortunes that shelter the wretched kept her in health and in strength, though she rarely had a roof over her at night, and all she ate were the broken pieces that people gave her in pity.

In his old haunts it was easy to hear of him; he had gone to study in Rome.

"He will do well for himself, never fear," they said in the old house on the Seine water, where her dream of joy had dreamt itself away. Some

great person, touched by his poverty and genius, and perhaps by his beauty, had given him means to pursue the high purposes of his art at leisure. Some said the great person was a woman, and a princess: no one knew for sure. Anyhow, he was gone to Rome.

Pippa knew the name of Rome.

People had gone through Signa sometimes, to wind away by the sea road, amongst the marshes and along the flat sickly shores, to Rome. And now and then through Signa, at fair time, or on feast days, there had strayed little children, in goatskins, and with strange pipes, who played sad airs, and said they were from Rome.

But the mountains had always risen between her and Rome. It had always been to her far off as some foreign land. Nevertheless, she set out for Rome by the sole way she knew—the way that she had travelled with him—straight across France and downward to the sea, and along the beautiful bold road, under the palm trees and the sea alps, and so along the Corniche back to Signa.

She knew that way; and, toilsome though it was, it was made sweet to her by remembered joys.

He had gone with her; and at every halting place there was some memory so precious, yet so terrible, that it would have been death to her, only the child was there, and wanted her, and had his smile, and so held her on to life.

Her lover had been with her in the summer and autumn weather; and all the way had been made mirthful with love's happy foolish ways; and the dust of the road had been as gold to her, because of the sweet words he murmured in her ear; and when they were tired they had leaned in one another's arms, and been at rest; and every moonlit night and rosy morning had been made beautiful, because of what they read in each other eyes and heard in the beating of each other's hearts.

Pippa had forgotten nothing; she had only forgotten that she had been forsaken.

Women are so slow to understand this always; and she, since that day when she had flung the money in the street, and fallen like a furious thing, biting the dust, and laughing horribly, had never been too clear of what had happened to her.

There was the child, and he—her love—was lost. This was all she knew.

Only she remembered every trifle, every moment of their first love time; and as she went, walking across great countries as other women cross a hayfield or a village street, she would look at the rose-bush at a cabin door, and think how he had plucked a rosebud there; or touch a gate rail with her lips, because his hand had rested on it; or lift the child to kiss a wayside crucifix, because he had hung a rope of woodbine there and painted it one noonday; and at each step would murmur to the child, "See, he was here—and here—and here—and here," and would fancy that the baby understood, and slept the sweeter because told these things.

Poor Pippa!—she had always plaited ill.

Women do, whose only strand is one short human love.

The tress will run uneven; and no man wants it long. Still, it is best to love thus. For nothing else is Love.

So she had walked on, till the golden autumn

weather lost its serenity, and stirred with strife of winter wind and rain; so she had walked, and walked, and walked—a beggar girl for all who met her, with no beauty in her, except her great, sad, lustrous eyes—until she found herself come out once more on that familiar road which she had trodden daily in her childhood and her girlhood, with her hank of straw over her arm, and a pitcher of milk, or a sheaf of gleaned corn, or a broad basket of mulberries balanced on her head.

She thought she would see Bruno—just once. He had been rough and fierce with her; but once she could have loved Bruno, if he would ever have let her do so. She thought she would show him the child, and ask him—if she never got to Rome——

Then her foot slipped, and she fell down into darkness, and of Pippa there was no more on earth—only a dead woman, that the flood took out, with the drowned cattle and the driftwood, to the sea.

CHAPTER VII.

LOCAL tradition has it that all this plain of Signa was once a lake with only the marsh birds calling and the reeds waving in the great silence of its waters—long ago. Their "long ago" is very dim in date and distance, but very close to fancy and to faith. Here Æneas is a hero born only yesterday, and Catiline brought his secret sins into the refuge of these hills an hour since it seems; and Hercules—one can almost see him still, bending his bold brows over the stubborn rock in that stream where the quail dips her wing and the distaff cane bends to the breeze.

Nay, it is not so very far away after all since the dove plucked the olive off the moun-

tains yonder, and no one sees anything strange or incongruous in the stories that make the sons of Enoch and the children of Latona tread these fields side by side, and the silver arrows of Apollo cleave the sunshine that the black crucifixes pierce. Nay, older than tale of the Dove or legend of Apollo is this soil. Turn it with your spade and you shall find the stone coffins and the gold chains of the mighty Etruscan race whose buried cities lie beneath your feet, their language and their history lost in the everlasting gloom.

This was once Etruria, in all the grace and greatness of her royalties; then through long ages the land was silent, and only heard the kite shriek or the mountain hare scream; then fortified places rose again, one by one, on the green slopes, and Florence set to work and built between her and the sea—between her and the coast, and all her many enemies and debtors—the walled village of the Eastra Signa; making it noble of its kind, as she made everything that she touched in the old time; giving it a girdle of the massive grey mountain stone, and

gateways with carven shields and frescoes; and houses within, braced with iron, and ennobled by bold archways and poetised by many a shrine and symbol.

And the Lastra stood in the green country that is called the Verdure even in the dry city rolls, and saw the spears glisten among the vines, and the steel head-pieces shine through the olives, and the banners flutter down from the heights, and the condottieri wind away on the white road, and the long lines of the pilgrims trail through the sunshine, and the scarlet pomp of the cardinals burn on the highway, and the great lords with their retinues ride to the sea or the mountains, and the heralds and trumpeters come and go on their message of peace or strife; and itself held the road, when need arose, staunchly, through many a dark day, and many a bitter night, for many a tale of years, and kept its warders on its watch-towers, looking westward through the centuries of war. And then the hour of fate struck when the black eagle, who has "two beaks to more devour," flew with his heavy wing over the Arno; and the Republic had no help or

hope but in her Gideon, as she called him:—frank Ferruccio.

Ferruccio knew that the Lastra was the iron key to the gates of Florence. But he had no gifts of gods to make him omniscient, and he was rash, as brave men are most apt to be. With his five hundred troopers he wrought miracles of valour and relief; but in a fatal hour he, scouting the country to search the convoys of food that he conveyed to Florence, left the Lastra for Pisa, and the traitor Bandini whispered in the ear of Orange, "Strike now—while he is absent." And Orange sent his Spanish lances, and the Lastra beat them back. But he sent them again as many in numbers against the place as was all Ferruccio's army, and with artillery to aid; and they made two breaches in the walls, and entered, and sacked and pillaged, and ravished and slew; the bold gates standing erect as they stand to-day.

Is not the record painted in the Hall of Leo the Tenth?

The brave gates stood erect; but the Lastra was an armed town no more.

Its days of battle were done.

The grass and the green creepers grew on the battlements; and out of the iron doors there only passed the meek oxen and the mules and the sheep.

The walls of the Lastra are very old, and are still beautiful. Broken down also in many places, and with many places where are hillocks of grass and green bushes instead of the old mighty stones, or, worse still, mean houses and tiled roofs. But they are still erect in a great part and very picturesque, with the ropemakers at work on the sward underneath them, and the white bullocks coming out of their open doors. The portcullis still hangs in the gateways that face the east and the west, and the deep machicolations of the battlements are sharp and firm as a lion's teeth. There is exquisite colour in them, and noble lines severe and stern as any that Arnolfo drew or raised. "She is so old—our Lastra!" say the people, with soft pride, while the women sit and spin on the stairs of the old watch-towers, and the mules drink, and the waggons pass, and the sheep are driven under their pointed archways.

Of the Lastra it may be written, as of the old tower of Calais church :—"It is not as ruins are, useless and piteous, feebly or fondly garrulous of better days; but useful still, going through its daily work as some old fisherman beaten grey by storm yet drawing his daily nets." Its years of war indeed are done; it can repel no foe—it can turn aside no invader; the wall-sorrel grows on its parapets, the owl builds in its loopholes, the dust of decay lies thick upon its broken stairs; in its fortified places old women spin flax and the spiders their webs; but its decay is not desolation, its silence is not solitude; its sadness is not despair; the Ave Maria echoes through it morning and night; when the warm sunrise smites the battlements, its people go forth to the labour of the soil; when the rays of the sunset fill the west, there rises from its mountains a million spears of gold, as though the hosts of a conquering army raised them aloft with a shout of triumph; it garners its living people still as sheep within a fold—"its bells for prayer still rolling through its rents." Harvest and vintage and seed-time are precious to it; fruits of the earth are

brought within it; the vine is green against its doors, and the corn is threshed in its ancient armouries; beautiful even where unsightly; hoary with age, yet linked with living youth; noble as a bare sea cliff is noble, that has kept the waves at bay throughout uncounted storms, the Lastra stands amidst the green billows of the foliage of the fields as a lighthouse amongst breakers: its towers speaking of strength, its fissures of sorrow, its granaries of labour, its belfries of hope.

When the great service was over, and the bishop and the nobles had passed away in their glory, and the bells had ceased for a season to ring, and the white-robed contadini had gone up amongst their hills, and the families of the Lastra had gone within doors and closed their window-shutters to the sun, the little singer, who loved every stone of the old place, laying off his little surplice, and by a rare treat being free of task and punishment, and sent only to gather salads from the hill garden of his one friend, made his way quickly through the village, and out by the western gate.

Just a child of Pippa's—with no name or use or place or title that anyone could see, or right to live at all, if you pushed matters closely.

That was all he was—a child of Pippa's, who had died without a coin upon her, or a roof she could call her own, or anything at all in this wide world except this little sunny-headed, soft-limbed, useless thing, fresh as dew and flushed like apple-blossoms, that she left behind her, as the magnolia-leaf, dropping brown, to the brown earth, leaves a blossom.

Himself, he did not know even so much as this, which indeed was as bad as nothing to know. To himself he was only a foundling, as he was to everyone else; picked up as any blind puppy might have been, motherless, on the face of the flood.

The old white town had stood him in the stead of father and mother, and nation and friends; and though the Church, purifying him with baptismal water, had given him a long saint's name, Signa was his true eponymus.

The children had called him Signa, because of the name on the little gilt ball that they were

scratched on—the little gilt ball which Nita had hung round his neck by its string again.

"It looks well to give it to him," she had said to her husband. "And it would fetch so little, it is not worth keeping for oneself."

So his little locket had been left him—the locket that had been bought that day of the fair, and filled with a curl of sunny-brown hair, which Pippa had cut off herself in the dusk where the vines met overhead;—and he was called after the word that was on it, first by the children, and then by their elders, who had said, "As well that as any name, why not? the dogs of Jews are often called after the towns that bear them; why not this little cur, so near drowned here, after the place that sheltered him?"

Hence he was Signa, like the town; and in a vague fancy that he never followed out, he had some dim idea that this village of the Lastra, which he loved so dearly, had created him; out of her dust, or from her wandering winds, or by her bidding to the owls that roosted in her battlements: how he did not know, but in some way. And he was thoroughly content; loving

the place with a great love quite reasonless, and quite childlike, and yet immeasurable.

He was proud because he had the name. When they beat him, he would not cry out, because the Lastra had been brave; so the old people who told stories of it to him said; and he would be brave likewise.

It was like his impudence to dare be brave when honest-born children squealed like caught mice! so Nita would say to him a score of times, slapping his cheek when Toto had trodden on her gown, or beating him with the rods of alder when Toto had stolen the fritters from the frying-pan.

"She is a good woman, Nita," said the neighbours, shaking out the gleaned hay before their house-doors, or sitting to plait together in the archways; "and Lippo is an angel. To think of them—seven children, and an eighth nigh—and keeping, all for charity, that little stray thing found at the flood. Any one else had sent it packing, a poor child, as one could tell by its clothes that were all rags, and no chance for any rich folk ever coming after it. And yet treating

it always like their own, share and share alike, and no preference shown—ah, they were good people. Old Baldo, too, not saying even a word, though he was a sharp man about shoe-leather, and no blame to him, because, after all, who will save the skin of your onion for you unless you do yourself?"

As from a baby it grew into a little child, Bruno ever and again saw to its wants.

"The child must be clean," he had said; and he would not have it go in rags.

"The child must be well kept," he had said; and he would not have its curls sheared close, as Toto's was.

Then as it grew older.

"Let the child learn," he had said; and Nita humoured him, because she believed it to be his own offspring, and Lippo, because of that good half of everything, which kept his father-in-law in such good humour, and left him himself free to idle in the sun, and lie face downward on the stone benches, and do nothing all day long except kill flies.

So Lippo and his wife were very careful to

have the child's curls shine, instead of shearing them close as they did their own babies', and when he ran into the street would give him a big lump of crust to eat as people passed, and on saint days take him with them to the church in a little frock snow-white, like one of the straight-robed, long-haired child-figures in any panel or predella of Della Francesca or the Memmi. He was so pretty that people gave him cakes and fruits and money, just for the beauty of his wistful eyes, and to see his little mouth, like a carnation bud, open to sing his Aves.

And of course there was reason that the child, once home, should give up the cakes and fruits to the other children who were like foster-brothers and sisters to him, and as for the money, of course he could not keep it, being such a little thing; they took it from him to take care of it—they were good, honest people.

As for the little lad, true he was hungry often, and beaten often, when no one was looking, and worked like a footsore mule at all times.

But then nobody noticed that, because he was always taken to mass, and had the little white

shirt on just like Toto, and no difference made, and all his curls brushed out. The curate's sister said there never was so sweet a soul as Lippo's, for of course it all was Lippo's doing; Nita was an honest woman, and true-hearted; but Lippo it was that was the saint in the house. Another man would have turned the brat out by the ears first sight: not he—he cut the stray child's bread as big as any of his boys', and paid for him, too, to learn his letters.

So the curate's sister said, the neighbours said after her; and Lippo, being a meek man, smiled gently, and cast his eyes down underneath the praise, and said in answer, that no one could have turned a pretty baby like that out after once housing it, and added, with a kindly grace that moved the women to tears, that he hoped the child might be like those gold-winged porcellini that, flying in your window with the sunbeams, bring good will and peace, the people say.

This day, after the ceremony, the little fellow ran over the bridge and up the hill-road, where his mother, of whom he knew nothing, had met

her death. He was stiff with a severe beating that had been given him.

The night before there had been a basket of red cherries missing, and Toto had been found crunching them in the loft, and Toto had said that he had been given them by Signa, who first had eaten half; and old Baldo, who had got them as a present for the priest, had been beside himself with rage, and Nita had beaten Signa, as her habit and daily comfort was, because he never would cry out, which made him the more provoking, and also was always innocent, than which there is nothing more irritating anywhere.

He was very stiff, and felt it now that the music was all done; but almost forgot it again in the pleasure of the hill-side and the holyday.

The country was full of joys to the child that he never reasoned about, but which filled him with delight. The great bold curves of the oak bough overhead; the amethyst and amber of the trefoil blossoms; the voices of the wood doves; the jovial croakings of the frogs; the flash of butterflies; the glories of the oleanders here, white as snow, and there rosily radiant as flame;

the poppies that had cast their petals, and had round grey heads like powdered wigs; the spiders, red and black, like bits of old Egyptian pottery; the demure and dusky cavaletti, that looked like ghosts of nuns, out by an error in the daylight; the pretty lizards that were so happy asking nothing of the world except a sunbeam and a stone to sleep under; the nightingales that were so tame, and sang at broad noontide to laugh at poets; the orchids, gold and ruby, that mimicked bees and flies to make fun of them, because there is so much humour in nature with all her sweet seriousness of beauty; the flies that shone like jewels; the hedges of china roses that ran between the corn; the gaunt stern spikes of the artichokes; the green Madonna's herb; the mountains that were sometimes quite lost in the white mists, and then of a sudden lifted themselves in all their glory, with black shadows where the woods were, and hazy breadths of colour where the bare marble shone beneath the sun; — all these things, so various, great and small, wonderful and obscure, under his feet, or on the far horizon, were sources of

delight to the child, who as he went lost sight of nothing from the little gemmed insect in the dust he trod to the last glow left on the faintest, farthest peak of the great hills that rose between him and the sea.

Nobody had ever told him anything.

None had led him by the hand and bade him look.

Some instinct moved him to see and hear where others were blind and deaf. That was all.

To the ploughman of Ayr the daisy was a tender grace of God, and the mouse a fellow traveller in the ways of life.

To Signa, who was only a baby still, and was beaten most days of the week, and ran barefoot in the dust, the summer and the world were beautiful without his knowing why, and comforted him. For in all this sea of sunshine—as in the music—he forgot his pain.

He ran like a little goat up the road with the green river winding below, and the hills changing at each step with those inconstancies of light and shade, and aspect, and colour in which all hills delight. It was an hour before, always

climbing sturdily, he reached an old stone gateway set in breadths of grain just golden for the sickle, with a black crucifix against it, and above it a little framed picture of the Annunciation.

He stooped his knee, and crossed himself; then ran between the old stone posts, which had no gate in them, and sent his voice up the hill-side before his feet. "Bruno! Bruno! Bruno!"

"Here!" sang the man's voice in answer from above, amongst the corn.

Signa climbed the steep green patches that ran between the wheat and under the vines up the face of the hill, and threw his arms round Bruno's knees.

"A whole day to spend!" he cried, breathless with running. "And are you working? Why it is Corpus Domini. They do not work anywhere!"

Bruno put down the handful of corn that he had just cut and wound together.

"No; one should not work," he said, with some shame for his own industry. "But those clouds look angry; they may mean rain at sunset;

and to spoil such grain as this—and the Padre will not come this way; he never gets so far down on feasts. And you are well, Signa?"

"Oh quite well."

"But you must be hungry?—running so?"

"No; I can wait."

"You have had your bread then?"

"Yes."

It was not true. But then Signa had found out two things: one, that when he told Bruno that he was ill-treated or ill-fed at home, there were quarrels and troubles between Bruno and his brother; and the other, that if he let Bruno see that he was at all unhappy, Bruno seemed to be consumed with self-reproach. So that the child whose single love, except that for the old town itself, was Bruno, had early learned to hold his tongue and bear his sorrows silently as best he might, and tell an innocent little lie even now and then to spare pain to his friend.

Bruno always took his part. It was Bruno who got him any little joy he ever knew, and Bruno who would not let them shave his pretty clustering curls to make a bare round pumpkin

of his head like Toto's; and one day when he had been only seven years old, and Bruno by chance had found him crying, and learned that it was with the smart of Nita's thrashing, Bruno and Lippo had had fierce words and blows; and late that night the eldest boy of Lippo's had come and shaken him in his bed of hay, and hissed savagely in his ear:

"You little fool, if you go telling my uncle Bruno we ill-treat you, he will strike at my father and kill him perhaps, who knows, he is so violent, and then a nice day's work you will have made for every one;—you little beast. My father dead, and Bruno at the galleys, all through you who are not worth the rind of a rotten melon, little cur!"

And Signa, trembling in his bed, had vaguely understood the mischief he might do, though why they quarrelled for him, and why Lippo gave him a home, and yet ill-treated him, or why Bruno should have any care to take his part, he could not tell; but he comprehended that all he had to do was to accept ill-usage dumbly, like the dogs, and bring none into any trouble

by complaining. And so he grew up—with silence for a habit: for he loved Bruno.

Bruno, who was fierce and wayward and hated and feared by every one on the country side, but who to him was gentle as a woman, and was always kind. Bruno, who had a most terrible knack of flashing out his knife in anger, and who had quarrelled with all the women he had wooed, and who had a rough heartless way of speech that made people wonder he could be of the same blood and bone as mild and pleasant Lippo, but who to him was never without a grave soft smile that took all the darkness from this face it shone on, and who for him had many tender thoughts and acts that were like the blue radish flower on its rough, grey, leafless stalk.

The child never wondered why Bruno cared for him. Children take love as they take sunshine and their daily bread. If it rain and they starve, then they wonder, because children come into the world with an innocent undoubting conviction that they will be happy in it, which is one of the oddest and the saddest things one sees; for, being begotten by men and borne by

women, how can any such strange error ever be alive in them?

Bruno put by his reaping-hook, and let the big bearded turkish wheat stand over for another day. He had risked his own soul to make sure of the wheat—for to Bruno it was a soul's peril to use a sickle on a holy day;—but he let go the corn rather than spoil the little fellow's pleasure.

"You can eat something again—come," he said, stretching his hand out to the boy's.

Pippa's child was like her, only with something spiritual and far-reaching in his great dark eyes that hers had never had, and a gleam of gold in the soft thickness of his hair that did not come from her. He was more delicate, more slender, more like a little supple reed than Pippa ever had been, and he had a more uncommon look about him; but he was like her—like enough to make Bruno still shudder now and then thinking of the dead woman left all alone to the rain and to the river.

"Come and eat," he said, and took the child indoors.

His house had a great arched door where

Pippa had stood plaiting many a night. It had a brick floor and a ceiling of old timbers, and some old dusky chests and presses that would have fetched a fortune in city curiosity shops, and a strong musty smell of drying herbs and of piles of peas and beans for winter uses, and trusses of straw cleaned and cut for the plaiters; and hens were sitting on their eggs inside an old gilded marriage coffer six hundred years old, if one, whose lid, that had dropped off the hinges, was illuminated with the nuptials of Galileo in the style of the early school of Cortona.

Through a square unglazed window there was seen the head of a brindled cow munching grass in her shed on the other side, and through a wide opening opposite that had no door, the noon sun shining showed the great open building that was granary and cart-shed, and stable and hothouse all in one, and where the oil-presses stood, and the vats for the wine, and the empty casks.

Against one of the walls was a crucifix with a little basin for holy water, for Bruno was a man who believed in the saints without question; and

above the arched entrance there grew a great mulberry-tree that was never stripped, because he had no silkworms, and magnolias and cistus-bushes, and huge poppies that loved to glow in the stones, and big dragon-heads flaming like rubies, and arabian jessamine of divinest odour, and big myrtles, all flourishing luxuriant alike together, because in this country flowers have nine lives like cats, and will live anywhere, just because no one wants them or ever thinks of gathering them unless there be a corpse to be dressed.

"Eat," said Bruno; and he got the little lad out some brown bread and a jug of milk, and a cabbage-leaf of currants, which he had gathered early that morning before the mass-bells rang, being sure Signa would come before the day should be over.

Signa ate and drank with the eager goodwill of a child who never got enough, except by some rare chance on a feast-day like this; but the larger part of the currants he left on the leaf, taking only one or two bunches.

Bruno watched him.

"Are you going to give them away?"

"I will give them to Gemma—I may?"

"Do as you like with your own. But if you must give them to any one, give them to Palma."

Signa coloured on both his little pale cheeks.

"I will give them to the two," he said, conscious of an unjust intention nipped in the bud.

"Palma is a better child than Gemma," said Bruno, sharpening a vine-stake with his clasp-knife.

Signa hung his head.

"But I like Gemma best."

"When that is said, there is no more to be said," answered Bruno, who had learned enough of human nature on the hills and in the Lastra to know that liking does not go by reason nor follow after merit.

"Gemma is so pretty," said the little fellow, who loved anything that had beauty in it; and he ran and got his mandoline out of the corner where Bruno let him keep it, and began to turn its keys and run his fingers over its strings and call the cadence out of it with as light a heart

as if his back had never been black and blue with Nita's thrashing.

"If Gemma broke your chitarra, would you like her the better then?" asked Bruno.

"I would hate her," said Signa under his breath; for he had two idols—his lute and the Lastra.

"I wish she would break it, then," said Bruno, who was jealous of this little child for whom Signa was saving his currants.

But Signa did not hear. He was sitting out on the threshold on an empty red lemon-pot turned upside down, with the slope of the autumn corn and the green hillside beneath him in the sun, and beyond them, far down below in the great valley, and golden in the light were first the walls of the Lastra set in the sea of vines, and then the towers and domes of Florence far away; and farther yet, where the east was warm with morning light, the mountains of Umbria, with the little towns on their crest, from which you see two seas.

With all that vast radiant world beneath him at his feet, Signa tuned his mandoline and sang

to himself untired on the still hillside. The cow leaned her mouth over the window-sill, and listened; cows seem so stupid, chewing grass and whisking flies away, but in their eyes there is the soul of Io; the nightingales held their breaths to listen, and then joined in till all the branches that they lived in seemed alive with sound; the great white watch-dog from the marshes came and laid down quite quiet, blinking solemnly with attentive eyes; but the cicali never stopped sawing like carpenters in the tree-tops, nor the gossipping hens from clacking in the cabbage-beds, because cicali and chickens think the world was made for them, and believe that the sun would fall if they ceased from fussing and fuming: —they are so very human.

Bruno laid himself down face forward on a stone bench, as contadini love to do when they have any leisure, and listened too, his head upon his arms.

The water dropped from the well-spout; a lemon fell with a little splash on the grass; the big black restless bees buzzed here and there; blue butterflies danced above the grain as if the

cornflowers had risen winged; the swallows wheeled round the low red-tiled roof; the old wooden plough lay in the shade under the fig-trees; the oxen ate clover and the leaves of cane in fragrant darkness in their shed; the west wind came from the pines above with the smell of the sea and the thyme and the rosemary.

Signa played and sang, making up his song as he went along, in rhymes strung like chains of daisies, all out of his own head, and born in a moment out of nothing, and, beginning with the name of a flower, and winding in with them the sun and the shadow, the beasts and the birds, the restless bees and the ploughshare at rest, and the full wheat-ears and the empty well-bucket, and anything and everything little and large, and foolish and wise, that was there about him in the midsummer light.

Anywhere else it might have been strange for a little peasant to make melody so; but here the children lisp in numbers, and up and down on the hills, and in the road when the mule-bells ring, and on the high mountains with the browsing goats, the verse and song of the

people fill the air all day long—this people who for the world have no poet.

Bruno, lying face downward and listening, half asleep, to the rippling music, thought it pretty, but nothing rare or of wonder; the little lad played better than most of his age, and had a gift for stringing his rhymes, that was all.

For himself, he was almost jealous of the lute as he was of the child Gemma. For Bruno loved the boy with a covetous love and a strong love, and felt as if in some way or other Signa escaped him.

The boy was loving, obedient, grateful, full of caressing and tractable ways; there was no fault to find with him; but Bruno at times felt that he held him no more surely than one holds a bird because it alights at one's feet.

It was a vague feeling with him. Bruno, being an unlearned man, did not reason about his impressions nor seek to know whether they were even wise ones. But it was a strong feeling with him, and something in the far-away

look of the little lad's eyes as he sang, strengthened it.

Pippa had never had that look; no one had it except the little Christs or St. Johns sometimes in the old frescoes in the churches that Bruno would enter once a year or so, when he went to Prato or Carmignano or Pistoia to buy grain or to sell it.

"That is God looking out of the eyes," an old sacristan here said once to him, before one of those altar pictures, where the wonderful faces were still radiant amidst the fading colours of the age-clad frescoes.

But why should God look out of the eyes of Pippa's child?

Why was God in him more than in any others?

Those children in the frescoes were most fitting in their place, no doubt, amongst the incense, and the lilies, and the crosses, and above the sacred Host. But to sit at your bench, and eat beans, and be sent to fetch in sheep from the hills;—Bruno felt that a more workaday soul was better for this, he would have been more at ease if Signa

had been just a noisy, idle, troublesome, merry morsel, playing more like other boys, and happy over a baked goose on a feast-day. He would have known better how to deal with him.

And yet not for worlds would he have changed him.

CHAPTER VIII.

If Pippa had not been quite dead that night when they had found her in the fields? If there had been any spark of life flickering in her that with warmth and care and a surgeon's skill might have been fanned back again into a steady flame? It was not likely; but it was possible. And if it had been so, then what were he and Lippo?

The sickly thought of it came upon him many a time and made him shiver and turn cold. When he had left the woman lying in the field he had been quite sure that all life was gone out of her. But now he was not so sure. Cold and the fall might have made her senseless. Who could tell? —if they had done their duty by her—Pippa might have been living now.

It was not probable. He knew the touch of a dead thing, and she had felt to him dead as any slaughtered sheep could be. But sometimes, in the long lonely nights of autumn, when he sat watching his grapes, with the gun against his knee, lest thieves should strip the vines, Bruno would think of it, and say to himself—"If she were not really dead, what was I?"

He told all to the good priest in the little brown church beneath the vines on his hill; told it all under the seal of confession, and the priest absolved him by reason of his true penitence and anxious sorrow. But Bruno could not absolve himself.

He had left her there for the flood to take her;—and after all she might have been brought back to life, had he lifted her up on his shoulders and borne her down into shelter and warmth, instead of deserting her there like a coward.

The water had done it; had washed her away out of sight and killed her if she were not already dead when it rose, and swept her out to the secrecy of the deep seas. But he told himself, at

times, that it was he who was the murderer—not the water.

When he looked at the river shining away between the green hills and the grey olives, he felt as if it knew his guilt, as if it were a fellow sinner with him, only the more innocent of the two. Of course the pain and the remorse of it were not always on him. He led an active life; he was always working at something or another, from daybreak till night; the free fresh air blew always about him, and blew morbid fancies from his brain. But at times, when all was quiet, in the hush of midnight, or when he rested from his labours at sunset, and all the world was gold and rose, then he thought of Pippa; then he felt the cold, pulseless breast underneath his hand; then he said to himself—"If she were not quite dead?" The torment of the thought worked in him and weighed on him, and made his heart yearn to the little lad, who, but for his cowardice, might not now have been motherless and alone.

Bruno sat on at his house door that night, watching the little lad run along the hill. He

could see all the way down the slope, and though the trees and the vines at times hid Signa from sight, and at times he was lost in the wheat, which was taller than he, yet at intervals, the small flying figure with the sunset about its hair, could be seen going down, down, down along the great slope, and Bruno watched it with a troubled fondness in his eyes.

He was doing the best for the child that he knew. He had him taught to read and write; he had him sing for the priests; he was learning the ways of the fields, and the needs of beasts, tending his sheep and Lippo's by turns, as a little contadino had to do in the simple life of the open air. He could not tell what more to do for him; he a peasant himself and the son of many generations of peasants, who had worked here one after another on the great green hill above the Lastra valley.

He did not know what else to do.

That was the way he had been brought up, except that he had never been taught a letter; running with bare legs over the thyme on the hills, and watching the sheep on the high places amongst

the gorze, and pattering through the dirt after the donkey, when there were green things to go into market, or loads of fir cones to be carried, or sacks of corn to be borne to the grinding press. If there was a better way to bring up a child he did not know it. And yet he was not altogether sure that Pippa, if she saw, from heaven, were satisfied.

The child was thinner than he liked, and his shirt was all holes, and never a little beggar was poorer clad than was Signa winter and summer; and Bruno knew that he gave into Lippo's pocket more than enough to keep a child well, for his land was rich, and he laboured hard, and he bore with Lippo's coming and going, and prying and calculating always to make sure how much the grain yielded, and to count the figs and potatoes, and to watch the winepress, and to see how the peas yielded, and to satisfy himself that he always got the full amount they had agreed for; he bore with all that from Lippo, though it was enough to exasperate a quieter man, and many a time he could have kicked his brother out of his fields for all that meddling and

measuring; and being an impatient temper and resentful, chafed like a tethered mastiff, to have Nita and her brood clamouring for roots and salads and eggs and buckwheat, as if he were a slave for them.

"The half of all I get," he had said in the rash haste of his repentance and remorse; and Lippo pinned him to his word.

He would have given the world that instead of that mad bargain made without thought, he had taken the child to himself wholly and told the truth in the Lastra, and given the poor dead body burial, and been free to do with Pippa's boy whatever he chose. But Bruno, like many others, had fallen by fear and haste into a false way; and stumbled on in it galled and entangled.

Bruno was now over forty years old, and his country folk spoke more ill of him rather than less. When he went down into the Lastra to sit and take a sup of wine, and play a game at dominoes as other men did, none were glad to see him. The women owed him a grudge because he married none of them, and the men thought him fierce and quarrelsome, when he was not taciturn,

and found that he spoiled mirth rather than increased it by his presence.

He was a handsome man still, and lithe, and burnt brown as a nut by the sun. He wore a loose shirt, open at the throat, and in winter had a long brown cloak tossed across from one shoulder to the other. He had bare feet, and the walk of a mountaineer or an athlete. Marching beside his bullocks, with a cart-load of hay, or going down to the river for fish, with his great net outspread on its circular frame, he was a noble, serious, majestic figure, and had a certain half wild, half lordly air about him that is not uncommon to the Tuscan peasant when he lives far enough from the cities not to be contaminated by them.

The nine years that had run by since the night of the flood, had darkened Bruno's name in the Lastra country.

Before that night he had been, whatever other faults or vices he had had, openhanded to a degree most rare amongst his people. A man that he had struck to the ground one day, he would open his leathern bag of coppers to the next. Whatever

other his crimes, he had always been generous, to utter improvidence, which is so strange a thing in his nation, that he was often nicknamed a madman for it. But no one quarrels with a madness that they profit by, and Bruno's generosity had got him forgiven many a misdeed and many a license, by men and women.

Since the flood, little by little, parsimony growing on him with each year, he had become careful of spending, quick to take his rights, and slow to fling down money for men's sport or women's kisses. The country said that Bruno was altogether given over to the devil, he was no longer good to get gain out of even; he had turned niggard, and there was no excuse for him, they averred; a better padrone no man worked under than he, and his fattore was old and easy; and the land that in the old time had served to maintain his father and mother with a tribe of children to eat them out of house and home, now had only himself upon it, good land and rich, and sheltered though on the mountains, whilst, as everyone knows, the higher the land lies the better is the vintage. Men gossipping

in the evenings under the old gateways of the Lastra, watching Bruno with his empty bullock-cart go back between the hedges to the bridge, would shake their heads :—

"A bad fellow!" said Momo, the barber, for Bruno never came to have his head shaved as clean Christians should in summer, but wore his thick dusky mane tossed back much like a lion's.

"Brutal bad!" echoed Papuccio, who was a tailor, with slack work. "No doubt that little fly-blow is his own, and see how he fathers it on Lippo. Lippo has as good as told me it was that poor Frita's child by Bruno; you remember her, a pretty young girl, died of a ball in the throat—or they said so—very likely it was Bruno, that wrung her neck in a rage—I should not wonder. He would have left the boy to starve, only Lippo took it home, and shamed him."

"He is good to the child now," said Noë, the tinman, who had a weakness for seeing both sides of a question, which made him very disagreeable company.

"Oh hi!" demurred the barber, with his

under-lip out in dubious reply. "The other day the little lad was bathing with my youngster, and I saw his back all blue and brown with bruises. 'Is he such a bad child you beat him so?' I said to Lippo, for indeed he was horrid to look at, and Lippo, good man, looked troubled. 'Bruno will be violent,' he told me quite reluctantly, 'he forgets the child is small.' Oh, I daresay he does forget, and when he has him alone there flays him of half his skin!"

"Why say the child was Bruno's or Frita's, either. He was found in the fields at the great flood, and Frita was dead a year before," said Noë, who had that awkward and unsocial quality, a memory. "Not but what I daresay it is Bruno's, and perhaps he pays for it," he added with an afterthought, willing to be popular.

"No, not a stiver," said the barber. "Lippo and Nita have said to me a score of times, 'we took the boy from pity, and we keep it from pity. Not a pin's worth shall we ever see back again this side heaven. But what matter that. When we feed eight mouths it is not much to feed a ninth.' They are good people, Lippo and his wife."

"Good as gold," said Brizzo, the butcher, "and saving money, or I suppose it is old Baldo's; they have bought that little pasture up at Santa Lucia; a snug little place, and twenty little Maremma sheep upon it as fat as I ever put knife into;—Lippo has God's grace."

"A fair spoken man always, and good company," said Momo, who had shaved him bare and smooth as a melon that very morning.

This was the general opinion in the Lastra. Lippo who had always a soft smart word for everybody; who smiled so on people who knew he hated them, that they believed they were loved whilst he was smiling; who was always ready for a nice game at dominoes or cards, and if he did cheat a little, did it so well that no one could fail to respect him the more for it; Lippo was well spoken of by his townsfolk, and one of the Council of the Misericordia had been often heard to say that there was not a better man in all the province.

But Bruno, now that he chose to save money, was a very son of the fiend without a spot of light anywhere. Now that he would never drink,

and now that he would never marry, the Lastra gave him over to Satan, body and soul, and for all time.

Bruno cared nothing at all. They might split their throats for any notice that he took.

"Ill words, rot no wheat," he would say to his one friend, Cecco, the cooper; who lived across by the bridge, and had a workshop there, with a great open arch of the thirteenth century sculpture, and a square window with crossed bars of iron, and a screen of vine-foliage behind it that might have been the background of a pietà—so beautiful was it when the sun shone through the leaves.

He went on his own ways, ploughing with his oxen, pruning his olives, sowing and reaping, and making the best of his land, and going down on market days into the city, looking as if he had stepped out of Ghirlandaio's panels, but himself knowing nothing of that, nor thinking of anything except the samples of grain in his palm or the cabbages in his cart.

Bruno cared nothing for other folks' opinions.

What he cared for was to keep faith with Pippa in that mute compact born of his remorse, which he firmly believed the saints had witnessed on her behalf.

He had cared nothing for the child at first, but as it had grown older, and each year caught hold of his hand more fondly, as if it felt a friend, and lifted up to him its great soft serious eyes, a personal affection for this young life which he alone protected, grew slowly upon him; and as the boy became older, and the intelligence and fancies of his eager mind awed the man whilst they bewildered him, Bruno loved him with the deep love of a dark and lonely soul, for the sole thing in which it makes its possibility of redemption here and hereafter.

He sat now at the house-door and watched the running figure so long as it was in sight. When the bottom of the hill was reached and the path turned under the lower vines, he lost him quite, and only knew that he must still be running on, on, on, under all those roofs and tangles of green leaves.

He was not quite at ease about him. The boy

never complained; nay, if questioned, insisted he was happy. But Bruno mistrusted his brother, and he doubted the peace of that household. The children, always grovelling and screaming, greedy and jealous, he hated. It was not the nest for this young nightingale—that he felt. But he did not see what better to do.

Lippo held him fast by his word; and he had no proof that the boy was really ill-used. Sometimes he saw bruises on him, but there was always some story of an accident, or of a childish quarrel to account for these, or of some just punishment, and he, roughly reared himself, knew that boys needed such; and Signa's lips were mute; or if they ever did open, said only "they are good to me,"—a lie, for which he confessed and besought pardon on his knees in the little dark corner in the Misericordia church.

Still Bruno was not satisfied. But what to alter he knew not, and he was not a man who could spare time or acquire the habit of holding communion with his own thoughts.

When the child had quite gone out of sight, he

rose and took his sickle again and went back to his wheat.

He seldom had anyone in to help him; men were careless sometimes, and split the straw in reaping, and spoiled it for the plaiters. He generally got all the wheat in between S. Procolo's day and S. Paul's; and the barley he took later.

The evening fell suddenly; where this land lies they lose the sunset because of the great rise of the hills; they see a great globe of fire dropping downward, it touches the purple of the mountain, and then all is night at once.

The bats came out and the night kestrels and the wood owls, and went hunting to and fro. Nameless melodious sounds echoed from tree to tree. The cicali went to bed and the grilli hummed about in their stead; they are cousins, only one likes the day and the other the night. The fireflies flitted, faint and paling, over the fallen corn. When the wheat was reaped their day was done. Later on a faint light came above the far Umbrian hills—a faint light in the sky like the dawn; then a little longer, and

out of the light rose the moon, a round world of gold ablaze above the dark, making the tree-boughs that crossed her disc, look black.

But Bruno looked at none of it.

He had not eyes like Pippa's child.

He stooped and cut his wheat, laying it in ridges tenderly. The fireflies put out their lights because the wheat was dead.

But the glowworms under the leaves in the grass shone on; they were pale and blue, and they could not dance; they never knew what it was to wheel in the air, or to fly so high that men took them for stars; they never saw the tree-tops or the nests of the hawks, or the lofty magnolia flowers, the fireflies only could do all that; but then the glowworms lived on from year to year, and the death of the wheat was nothing to them; they were worms of good sense, and had holes in the ground.

They twinkled on the sod as long as they liked, and pitied the fireflies, burning themselves out by soaring so high, and dying because their loves were dead.

CHAPTER IX.

THE child Signa ran on through the soft grey night.

Toto was afraid of the night, but he—never.

The fireflies ran with him along the waves of the standing corn. Wheat was cut first on the sunniest land, and there was much still left unreapen on the lower ground.

One wonders there are no fairies where there are fireflies, for fireflies seem fairies. But no fairies are found where the Greek gods have lived. Frail Titania has no place beside Demeter; even Puck will not venture to ruffle Pan's sleep; and where the harp of Apollo Cynthœrides was once heard, Ariel does not dare sing his song to the bees.

Signa caught a firefly in his hand and watched it burn a minute and then let it loose again, and ran on his way.

He wished he could be one of them, up in the air so high, with that light always showing them all they wished to know; seeing how the owls lived on the roofs of the towers, and how the bees ruled their commonwealth on the top of the acacias, and how the snow blossom came out of the brown magnolia spikes, and how the cypress tree made her golden balls, and how the stone-pine added cubics to his height so noiselessly and fast, and how the clouds looked to the swallows that lived so near them on the chapel belfries, and how the wheat felt when it saw the sickle, and whether it was pained to die and leave the sun, or whether it was glad to go and still the pain of hungry children. Oh what he would ask and know, he thought, if only he were a firefly!

But he was only a little boy with nothing to teach him anything, and a heart too big for his body, and no wings to rise upon, but only feet to carry him, that were often tired, and bruised, and weary of the dust.

So he ran down towards the Lastra, stumbling and going slowly, because he was in the dark, and also because he was so constantly looking upward at the fireflies, that he lost his footing many times.

Across the bridge, he turned aside and went up into the fields to the right of him before he walked on to the Lastra.

Between the bridge and the Lastra it is a picturesque and broken country. On one side is the river, and on the other hilly ground, green with plumes of corn, and hedges of briar-rose, and tall rustling poplars, and up above, cypresses; and old villas, noble in decay, and monasteries with frescoes crumbling to dust, and fortresses that are barns and stables for cattle, and convent chapels, whose solitary bell answers the bells of the goats as they graze.

Signa ran up the steep grassy ways a little, and through a field or two under the canes, twice his own height, and came to a little cottage, much lower, smaller, and more miserable than Bruno's house; a cottage that had only a few

roods of soil apportioned to it, and those not very arable.

Before its door there were several sheaves of corn lying on the ground; all its produce except the few vegetables it yielded. The grain had been cut the day before and was not carried in on account of the day being a holy one, for its owner did not venture to risk his hereafter as Bruno had dared to do.

The man was sitting on the stone bench outside his door; a good-humoured fellow, lazy, stupid, very poor, but quite contented. He was one of the labourers in the gardens of a great villa close by, called Giovoli. He had many children, and was as poor as it is possible to be without begging on the roads.

"Where is Gemma," called Signa. The man pointed in-doors with the stem of his pipe:

"Gone to bed, and Palma too, and I go too, in a minute or less; you are out late, little fellow."

"I have been with Bruno," said Signa, unfolding his cabbage leaf and his currants in the

starlight, that was beginning to gleam through the deep shadow of the early evening. "Look, I have brought these for Gemma; may I run in and give them to her? They are so sweet!"

The gardener, who was called Sandro by everybody, his name being Alessandro Zanobetto, nodded in assent. He was a good-natured, idle, mirthful soul, and could never see why Lippo's wife should treat the child so cruelly; he had plagues enough himself, but never beat them.

"If Gemma be asleep she will wake, if there be anything to get," he said, with a little chuckle; himself he thought Palma worth a thousand of her.

Signa ran indoors.

It was a square-built place, all littered and untidy; there were hens at roost, and garden refuse, and straw with a kid and its mother on it; and a table and a bench or two, and a crucifix with a bough of willow, and in the corner, a bed of hay upon the floor, sweet-smelling, and full of dry flowers.

Two children were in it, all hidden in the

hay, except their heads and the points of their feet.

One was dark, a little brown, strong, soft-eyed child, and the other was of that curious fairness, with the hair of reddened gold, and the eyes like summer skies, which the old Goths have left here and there in the Latin races. Both were asleep.

They were like two little amorini in any old painting, with their curving limbs, and their curly heads, and their rosy mouths, curled up, in the withered grasses; the boy did not know anything about that, but he vaguely felt that it was pretty to see them lying so, just as it was pretty to see a cluster of pomegranate flowers blowing in the sun.

He stole up on tiptoe, and touching the cheek of the fair one with a bunch of currants, laughed to see her blue bright eyes open wide on him with a stare.

"I have brought you some fruit, Gemma," he said, and tried to kiss her.

"Give me! give me quick!" cried the little child tumbling up half erect in the hay, the dried

daisies in her crumpled curls, and her little bare chest and shoulders fit for a statue of Cupid. She pushed away his lips; she wanted the fruit.

"If I do not eat it quick, Palma will wake," she whispered, and began to crunch them in her tiny teeth as the kid did its grasses. The dark child did wake, and lifted herself on her elbow.

"It is Signa!" she cried, with a little coo of delight like a wood pigeon's.

"I kept you no currants, Palma!" said Signa, with a sudden pang of self-reproach. He knew that he had done unkindly.

Palma looked a little sorrowful. They were very poor, and never hardly tasted anything except the black bread, like the dogs.

"Never mind; come and kiss me," she said, with a little sigh.

Signa went round and kissed her. But he went back to Gemma again.

"Good night," he said to the pretty white child, sitting up in the hay; and he kissed her once more. So Gemma was kissed twice; and had the currants as well.

Palma was used to that.

Signa ran out with a hardened conscience. He knew he had been unjust; but then if he had given any of the currants to Palma, Gemma never would have kissed him at all.

He liked them both; little things of ten and nine, living with their father and their brothers close to the gates of the great garden, low down on the same hill where, higher, Lippo's sheep were kept.

He liked them both, having seen them from babyhood, and paddled in the brook under the poplars with them, and strung them chains of berries, and played them tunes on the pipes he cut from the reeds.

They were both his playfellows, pretty little things, half-naked, bare-footed, fed by the air and the sun, and tumbling into life, as little rabbits do amongst the grass.

But Palma he did not care about, and about Gemma he did. For Gemma was a thousand times the prettier, and Palma loved him always, that he knew; but of Gemma he never was so sure.

Nevertheless, he knew he had not done them justice about those currants, and he was sorry for it, as he ran along the straight road into the Lastra, and with one look upward to the gateway that he loved, though he could not see the colour on the parapet because it was dark, he darted onward quickly lest the gates should close for the night and he be punished and turned backward, and hurried up the passage into Lippo's house.

Lippo lived in a steep paved road above the Place of Arms, and close to the open-arched loggia of what used to be the wood market, against the southern gate. There is no great beauty about the place, and yet it has light and shade, and colour, and antiquity, to charm a Prout or furnish a Canaletto. The loggia has the bold round arches that Orcagna most loved; the walls have the dim, soft brown and greys of age, with flecks of colour, where the frescoes once were; through the gateway there come the ox carts and the mules, and the herds of goats, down the steep paved way; there is a quiver of green leaves, a breadth of blue sky, and at the

bottom of the passage-way there is a shrine of our Lady of Good Council, so old that the people can tell you nothing of it; you can see the angels still with their illumined wings, and the Virgin with rays of gold, who sits behind a wicket of grey wood, with a carven M interlaced before her, and quaint little doors that open and shut; but of who made it or first set it up for worship there they can tell you nothing at all.

It is only a bit of the Lastra that nobody sees except the fattori rattling over the stones in their light carts, or the contadini going in for their master's letters, or now and then a noble driving to his villa, and the country folks coming for justice or for sentence to the Prefettura. But there is beauty in it, and poetry; and the Madonna who sits behind her little grey wicket has seen so much since first the lilies of liberty were carved on the bold east gate.

The boy's heart beat quickly as he went up the stairs; he was brave in a shy, silent way, and he believed that the angels were very near, and would help him some day. Still Nita's weighty

arm, and the force of her alder twigs or her ash stem, were not things to be got rid of by dreaming, and the angels were very slow to come; no doubt because he was not good enough, as Signa thought sorrowfully. And he had sent them further away from him than ever by that unjust act about the currants, so that his heart throbbed fast as he climbed the rickety stairs where the spiders had it all their own way, and the old scorpions never were frightened by a broom, which made them very happy, because scorpions hate a broom, and tumble down dead at the sight of one (cleanliness having immeasurable power over them), in as moral an allegory as Æsop and Fontaine could ever have wished to draw.

Nita and all her noisy brood were standing together over the table with a big loaf on it, and an empty bowl and flasks of oil and vinegar, getting ready for supper.

Lippo was down in the street playing dominoes, and old Baldo was sitting below puzzling out, by a bronze lamp, from a book of dreams, some signs he had had visions of in a doze, to see their numbers for the tombola.

"How late you are, you little plague, I gave you till sunset," screamed Nita, as she saw him. "And where is the salad—give me—quick!"

"I am very sorry," stammered Signa, timidly. "The salad? I forgot it. I am very sorry!"

"Sorry; and I waiting all this time for supper," shrieked Nita. "Nothing to do but just to cut a lettuce, and some endive off the ground, and you forget it. Where have you been all day?"

"With Bruno."

"With Bruno—of course with Bruno—and could not bring a salad off his land. The only thing you had to think of, and we waiting for supper, and the sun over the mountains more than an hour ago, and you stuffed up there, I warrant, like a fatting goose!"

"I had some bread and milk," said Signa. He was trembling in all his little limbs; he could not help this, they beat him so, so often, and he knew well what was coming.

"And nothing else?" screamed Nita, for every good thing that went to him she con-

sidered robbery and violence done on her own children.

"I had fruit—but I took it to Zanobetto's girls," said Signa, very low, because he was such a foolish little fellow, that neither example, nor execration, nor constant influence of lying could ever make him untruthful, and a child is always either untruthful or most exaggerately exact in truth—there is no medium for him.

"And not to us," screeched Nita's eldest daughter, and boxed him on the ear.

"You little beast," said Georgio, the biggest boy, and kicked him.

Toto waited about, and sprang on him like a cat, and pulled his hair till he tore some curls out by the roots.

Signa was very pale, but he never made sound nor effort. He stood stock-still and mute, and bore it. He had seen pictures of S. Stephen and S. Lawrence and of Christ—and they were still and quiet always, letting their enemies have their way. Perhaps, if he were still too, he thought, it might be forgiven to him—that sin about the currants.

Nita, with an iron hand, sent her offsprings off, reeling to their places, and seized him herself and stripped him.

He was all bruised from the night's beating still; but she did not pause for that. She plucked down her rod of alder twigs, and thrashed him till he bled again. Then threw him into the hay in the inner room beyond where the boys slept.

All the time he was quite mute. Shut up in the dark his courage gave way under the pain, and he burst out crying.

"Dear angels, do not be angry with me any more," he prayed, "and I only did it to make Gemma happy; and they beat me so here, and I never tell Bruno."

But the angels, wherever they be, never now come this side of the sun: and Signa lay all alone in the dark, and got no rest nor answer.

"The lute will be sorry," he thought, getting tired of waiting for the angels.

He told all his sorrows and joys to the lute, and he was sure it understood, for did it not

[illegible] him, just as his [illegible] sobbing in [illegible] sense of the [illegible] any likeness of [illegible] on earth.

CHAPTER X.

THE little fellow had a laborious life at the best of times, but he had so grown up in it that it never occurred to him to repine.

True Toto, the same age as himself, and a mother's darling, led one just as lazy and agreeable as his was hard and over-worked. Toto sported in the sun at pleasure, played morra for halfpence, robbed cherry trees, slept through noon, devoured fried beans and green almonds and artichokes in oil, and refused to be of any earthly use to any human creature through all his dirty idle days as best beseemed to him. But Signa from the cradle upward had been taught to give way to Toto, and been taught to know that the measure of life for Toto was golden and for him was lead.

It had always been so from the first, when Nita had laid him hungry in the hay to turn to Toto full but screaming.

Signa, sent out in the dark before the sun rose to see to the sheep on the hill, kept on the hill winter and summer if he were not sent higher to fetch things from Bruno's garden and fields; running on a dozen errands a day for Baldo or Lippo or Nita; trotting by the donkey's side with vegetables along the seven dusty miles into the city, and trotting back again afoot, because the donkey was laden with charcoal, or linen to be washed, or some other town burden that Lippo earned a penny by in fetching for his neighbours; early and late, in heat and in cold, when the south wind scorched, as when the north wind howled, Signa was always on his feet, doing this and that and the other. But he had got quite used to it, and thought it a wonderful treat that they allowed him to sing now and then for the priests, and that he let his voice loose as loud as he liked on the hill-sides and in the fields.

When he went up into these fields and knew the beautiful Tuscan world in summer, the liberty

and the loveliness of it made him happy without his knowing why, because the poetic temper was alive in him.

The little breadths of grass-land white as snow with a million cups of the earth-creeping bindweed. The yellow wheat clambering the hill-sides and darkened to ruddy bronze when the vine-shadows fell over it. The springtide glory of the Judas trees, which here they call in cruel irony the Tree of Love, with their rose flowers blushing amongst the great walnuts and the cone-dropping firs. The fig-trees and the apple-trees flinging their boughs together in June, like children clasping arms in play. The glowworm lying under the moss, while the fireflies shone aloft in the leaves. The blue butterflies astir like living cornflowers amongst the bearded barley, and the dainty grace of the oats. The little shallow brooks sleeping in sun and shade under the green canes, with the droll frogs talking of the weather. The cistus, that looks so like the dog-rose that you pluck one for the other every day, covering the rough loose stones and crumbling walls with beauty so delicate you fear to

breathe on it. The long turf paths between the vines, left for the bullocks to pass by in vintage time, and filled with colours from clover or iris, blue bugloss, or bright fritillaria. The wayside crucifixes so hidden in coils of vine and growing stalks of rush-like millet and the swaying fronds of acacia off-shoots that you scarce can see the cross for the foliage. The high hills that seem to sleep against the sun, so still they look, and dim and dreamful, with clouds of olives, soft as mist, and flecks of white where the mountain villages are, distant as far off sails of ships, and full, like them, of vague fancy and hope and perils of the past. All these things were beautiful to him, and he was very happy when he went up to Bruno.

Besides, this tall dark fellow, who scowled on everyone and should have been a brigand, people said, was always good to him.

He had to work, indeed, for Bruno, to carry the cabbages into the town, to pump the water from the tanks, to pick the insects off the vines, to cut the distaff canes, to carry the cow her fresh fodder, to do all the many things that are

always wanting to be done from dawn to eve on a little farm. But then Bruno always spared him half an hour for his lute, always gave him a good meal, always let him enjoy himself when he could, and constantly interceded to get him spared labour on a feast day, and leave to attend the communal school.

He did not wonder either at Bruno's kindness or at the other's unkindness; because children take good and evil as the birds take rain and sunshine. But it lightened the troubles of his young life and made them bearable.

He had never wandered farther than the hills above the town, and sometimes he was sent with the donkey into Florence; that was all. But the war-worn staunch old Lastra is enough world for a child; it would be too wide a one for an historian, could all its stones have tongues.

It is a trite saying that it is not what we see but how we see that matters; and Signa saw in his battle-dinted world-forsaken little town more things and more meanings than a million grown-up wanderers would have seen in the width of many countries.

He got the old men to tell him stories of it in the great republican centuries; the stories were apocryphal, no doubt, but had that fitness which almost does as well as truth in popular traditions, and, indeed, is truth itself in a measure.

He knew how to read, and in old muniment rooms, going to decay in farmhouses and granaries, found tattered chronicles which he could spell out with more or less success. He knew all the old towers and ruined fortresses as the owls knew them. When he got a little time to himself, which was not very often, he would wander away up into the high places and play his lute to the sunny silence, and fancy himself a minstrel like those he saw in the illuminations of the vellum rolls that the rats ate in many a villa, once a palace and now a wine-warehouse, whose lords had died out root and branch. Wading knee-deep in the green river water amongst the canes and the croaking frogs that the other boys were fishing for, his shining eyes saw the broad channel of the river filled with struggling horses and fighting men, as they told him it had been in

the old days when Castruccio had forded it and Ferruccio had ridden over it with his lances.

It was all odds and ends and waifs and strays of most imperfect knowledge that he got, for every one was ignorant around him, and though the people were proud of their history, they so mixed it up with grotesque invention and distorted hyperbole that it was almost worthless. Still the little that he knew made the old town beautiful to him and venerable and most wonderful, as Troy, if he could see it entire, would seem to a Hellenic scholar. His little head was full of delicate and glorious fancies, as he pattered on his bare brown feet beside the donkey under the gateways of the Lastra;—the west one with its circlet of azure where the monochrom used to be, and its chasm of green where the ivy and bushes grow; and the east one with its great stone shields, and its yawning depth of arch, and its warders' turrets on the roof.

He was so absorbed in thinking, that he would sometimes never see the turnips jump out of the panniers, or the chestnuts shake out of the sacks on the donkey's back, and Nita would beat

him till he was sick for leaving them rolling in the Lastra streets—to be puzzling about old colours on the tops of gates, when the blessed vegetables were flying loose like mad things on the stones!—it was enough to call down the instant judgment of heaven, she averred.

Those gleams of blue on the battlements, what use were they? and as for the clouds—they were always holding off when they were wanted, and coming down when rain was ruin. But as for turnips and beans—about their preciousness there could be no manner of doubt. And she taught the priority of the claims of the soup-pot with a thick cudgel, as the world teaches it to the poet. The poet often learns the lesson, and puts his conscience in to stew, as if it were an onion; finding philosophy will bake no bread.

But no beating could cure Signa of looking at the frescoes, and hearing the angels singing in the clouds above.

Signa was not as other children were. To Nita he seemed more foolish and more worthless than any of them, and she despised him.

"You cannot beat the gates down nor the clouds," said Signa, when she thrashed him, and that comforted him. But such an answer seemed to Nita the very pertinacy of the Evil One himself.

"He was an obstinate little beast," said Nita, "and if it were not for that half of Bruno's land——"

But he was not obstinate. He only stretched towards the light he saw, as the plant in the cellar will stretch through the bars.

Tens of millions of little peasants come to the birth, and grow up and become men, and do the daily bidding of the world, and work and die, and have no more of soul or Godhead in them than the grains of sand. But here and there, with no lot different to his fellows, one is born to dream and muse and struggle to the sun of higher desires, and the world calls such a one Burns, or Hadyn, or Giotto, or Shakespeare, or whatever name the fierce light of fame may burn upon and make irredescent.

Some other relaxations and enjoyments too the child found; and here and there people were good

to him; women for the sake of his pretty innocent face, with the cloud of dusky golden hair tumbling half over it always, and priests for the sake of his voice, which gave such beauty to their services, when anything great happened to demand a full ceremonial in their dark, quiet, frescoed sanctuaries scattered under the hills and on them. Indeed Lippo would have taken him into the city, and made money of his singing in the celebrations at Easter time, or on Ascension Day, or in Holy Week at the grand ceremonies of Rome. But of that Bruno would never hear. He set his heel down on the ground with an oath.

"Sell your soul, if you please, and the devil is fool enough to pay for it," he said, "but you shall never sell the throat of Pippa's child like any trapped nightingale's."

Poor Lippo sighed and yielded; it was one of those things in which his own good sense and calm wisdom had to let themselves be overborne by his brother's impetuous unreason. The churches—even the great ones—pay but a few pence; it was not worth while risking for a few coppers, or for an uncertain future, that lucrative

"half of my half" off the rich fields and vine-paths of the Artimino mountain.

So Signa sang here and there, a few times in the year, in the little choirs about the Lastra for nothing at all but the love of it; and in the Holy Week sang in the church of the Misericordia, where one of his chief haunts and sweetest pleasures was found at all times.

It is the only church within the Lastra walls, the parish church being outside upon the hills, and very little used. It is a small place, grey and grim of exterior, with its red door veils hanging down much worn, and having, within, its altar piece by Cimabue, only shown on high and holy feasts; no religious building in this country, however lowly, is quite without some treasure of the kind.

The church fills to overflowing at high mass, and the people stand on the steps and in the street, and the sound of the chanting and the smoke of the incense, and the tinkle of the little bells come out on to the air over the bowed heads, and with them there mingle all sweet common country sounds, from bleating sheep

and rushing winds, and watch-dogs baying afar off, and heaving ropes grating boats against the bridge; and the people murmur their prayers in the sun, and bow and kneel and go home comforted, if they know not very well why they are so.

Above the body of the church, led up to by a wooden staircase, there are the rooms of the Fraternity to which all good men and true belong for the love of the poor and the service of heaven. Rooms divided into little cells, each with the black robes and mask of a brother of the order in it; and black-lettered lines of Scripture above, and the crossbones of death; and closets where the embroidered banners are, and the sacred things for holy offices, and the black velvet pall, with its memento mori and its golden skulls, that covers each brother on his last travel to his latest rest.

Here, in the stillness and the silence, with these symbols of death everywhere around, there dwelt at this time in the dull songless church a man who, in his day, had been a careless wandering singer, loving his art honestly, though himself one of the lowliest of her servitors.

Born in the Lastra, with a sweet voice and an untrained love of harmony, his tastes had led him to wander away from it, and join one of the troops of musicians who make the chance companies in the many small theatres that are to be found in the Italian towns which lie out of the great highways, and are hardly known by name, except in their own commune. He had never risen high in his profession, though a favourite in the little cities, but had always wandered about from season to season from playhouse to playhouse; and in the middle way of his career a drenching in a rain-storm, after a burning day, had made his throat mute and closed his singing life forever. He had returned to his birthplace, and there joining the Misericordia, had become organist and sacristan to their church in the Lastra, and had stayed in those offices some thirty years, and now was over seventy; a silent, timid, old creature usually, but of a gentle temper, and liking nothing better than to recall the days of his wanderings as a singer, or to linger over the keys of his old organ with some world-forgotten score before him.

There was little scope for his fondness for melody in the Lastra. It was only in Holy Week that he could arrange any choral service; or once in two or three years, perhaps, there would come such a chance for him as he had had on that day of Corpus Domini when the bishop's visit had brought about an unusual greatness of ceremonial.

At all other times all he could ever do was to play a few symphonies or fugues at high mass, and if any village child had a great turn for melody, teach it the little science that he knew, as he taught Signa; Signa who was so docile a pupil that he would have knelt in happy obedience to the whip which S. Gregory bought for his scholars—only he never would have merited it for the transgression of singing out of time.

The stillness, the sadness, the seclusion, where no sound came unless it were some tolling bell upon the hills, the melancholy associations of the place, which all spoke of pain, of effort, of sorrow, of the needs of the poor, and of the warnings of the grave, all these fostered the dreamful temper of the boy, and the thoughtful-

ness which was beyond his years; and he passed many a happy tranquil hour listening to the old man playing, or trying to reproduce upon his lute, as best he might, themes of the musicians of earlier generations—from the fugues of Merula—from the airs of Zingarelli—from the Stabat Mater of Jesi—from the Benedictus of Jomelli—from the Credo of Perez—from the Cantata of Porpora—knowing nothing of their names or value, but finding out their melodies and meanings by sheer instinct.

Luigi Dini—whom everyone called Gigi—had many a crabbed old score and fine sonata and cantata copied out by his own hands, and the child, having been taught his notes, had grown able to find his way in this labyrinth, and pick out beautiful things from the dust of ages by ear and instinct, and make them all his own, as love appropriates whatever it worships; and never knew, as he went over the stones of the Lastra with the donkey, and woke the people in their beds with his clear voice, whilst all was dark, and only he and the birds were astir, that when he was singing the great *Se*

circa, se dice, or the mighty *Misero pargoletto,* or the delicious *Quelli-là,* or the tender *Deh signore!* he was giving out to the silent street, and the dreaming echoes, and the wakening flush of day, airs that had been the rapture of the listening world a century before.

Grave Gregorian melodies; Laudi of the Florentine laudisti of the Middle Ages; hymns from the monasteries, modelled on the old Greek traditions, with "the note the slave of the word;" all things simple, pure, and old filled the manuscripts of the sacristy like antique jewels. Signa, very little, very ignorant, very helpless, strayed amongst them confused and unconscious of the value of the things he played with, and yet got the good out of them and felt their richness and was nourished on the strength of them, and ran away to them at every stolen moment that he could, while Luigi Dini stood by and listened, and was moved at the wonderful instinct of the child, as the Romans were moved at the young Mozart's rendering of the Allegri requiem.

Music was in the heart and the brain of the child; his feet moved to it over the dusty roads,

his heavy burdens were lightened by it, and, when they scolded him, often he did not hear—there were so many voices singing to him. Where did the voices come from? he did not know; only he heard them when he lay awake in the straw, beside the other boys, with the stars shining through the unglazed window of the roof, as he heard them when the hot noon was bright and still on the hill-top where he strayed all alone with his sheep.

One day he found the magical voices shut up in a little brown prison of wood, as a great soul ere now has been pent in a mean little body;—one day, a wonderful day, after which all the world changed for him.

In a little shop in the Lastra by the Porta Fiorentina, there was a violin for sale. A violin in pear-wood, with a shell inlaid upon its case, and reputed to be very, very old.

Tonino, the locksmith and tinman, had it. So many years before that he could not count them a lodger had left it with him in default of rent, and never had gone back for it. The violin lay neglected in the dust of an old cupboard. One

day a pedlar had spied it and offered ten francs for it. Tonino said to himself, if a pedlar would give that, it must be worth four times the sum at least, and put it in his window with his old keys and his new saucepans, and his ancient locks and his spick and span bright coffee pots; a little old dusky window just within the tall east gateway of the Lastra, where the great poplars throw their welcome shadow across the sunny road.

Signa going on an errand there one day and left alone in the shop took it up and began to make the strings sound, not knowing how, but finding the music out for himself as the young Pascal found the science of mathematics.

When Tonino entered his workshop, with a pair of hot pincers in his hand, he was frightened to death to hear the sweetest sounds dancing about the air like butterflies, and when he discovered that the child was playing on his precious violin that the pedlar would have given ten francs for, he hardly knew whether to kiss the child for being so clever or whether to pinch him with the red-hot nippers for his im-

pudence. Anyhow he snatched the violin from him and put it in the window again.

A thing that could make so sweet a noise must be worth double what he thought.

So he put a price of forty francs upon it, and stuck it amongst his tins, hoping to sell it; dealers or gentlefolks came sometimes up and down the Lastra, seeing if there were any pretty or ancient thing to buy, for the people have beautiful old work very often in lace, in majolica, in carvings, in missals, in *repoussé*, in copper, and can be cheated out of these with an ease that quite endears them to those who do it.

A few people looked at Tonino's violin, but no one bought it; because the right people did not see it, or because it was an old violin without any special grace of Cremona or value of Bologna on its case. As it lay there in the window amongst the rusty iron and the shining tin things, with the dust drifting over it, and the flies buzzing about its strings, Signa saw it twenty times a week, and sighed his little soul out for it.

Oh the unutterable wonder locked up in that

pear-wood case! oh, the deep undreamed-of joys that lay in those mute strings!

The child thought of nothing else. After those murmurs of marvellous meanings that had come to him when touching that strange thing, he dreamed of it by day and night. The lute was dear to him; but what was the power of the lute beside those heights and depths of sound that this unknown creature could give?—for a living creature it was to him, as much as was the redbreast or thrush.

Only to touch it again! just once to touch it again!

He begged and prayed Tonino; but the tinman was inexorable. He could not risk his bit of property in such babyish hands. True the child had made the music jump out of it; but that might have been an accident, and who could tell that another time he would not break it—a little beggar's brat like that, without people to pay for it if any damage were done.

"Give me my forty francs and you shall have it, piccinino," Tonino would say with a grin, knowing that he might as well tell the

child to bring him down the star-dust from the skies.

Signa would go away with his little head hung down; the longing for the violin possessing him with a one-idea'd passion. In the young child with whom genius is born its vague tumultuous desires work without his knowing what it is that ails him.

The children laughed at him, the old people scolded him, Nita beat him, Bruno even grew impatient with him because he was always sighing for an old fiddle, that it was as absurd for him to dream of as if it were a king's sword or a queen's pearls.

"As if he were not lazy and tiresome enough as it is!" said Nita, boxing his ears soundly, when she went by one evening and caught him leaning against Tonino's casement, and looking with longing, pitiful, ardent eyes at the treasure in its pear-wood shell.

After a time the child, shy and proud in temper, grew ashamed of his own enthusiasm, and hid it from the others, and never any more tried to soften Tonino's heart and get leave to touch that magical bow again.

Bruno thought he had forgotten it and was

glad. The violin lay with the metal pots and the rusty locks, and no one bought it. Signa when he had to go past, on an errand through the gate, to Castagnolo or S. Maria del Greve, or any other eastward village, tried not to look at the brown shining wood that the wasps and the mosquitoes were humming over at their will. But he longed for it the more because he kept the longing silent, and had no chance of ever feeling those keys of enchantment under his little fingers. A thing repressed, grows.

He would lie awake at night thinking of the violin; if it had not been so wicked he would have stolen something to buy it with; some days it was all he could do to keep himself from stealing it itself.

One bright afternoon in especial, when everyone was at a marionnette show in the square, and he had come back very foot-sore from the city, and passing saw Tonino's place was empty and the old lattice window was open and the sun's rays fell across the violin, it would have been the work of a second to put his hand in, and draw it out, and run off—anywhere—any-

where, what would it have mattered where, if only he had carried all that music with him?

For genius is fanaticism; and the little barefoot hungry fellow, running errands in the dust, had genius in him, and was tossed about by it like a small moth by a storm.

To run away and wander, with the violin to talk to him wherever he might go:—the longing to do this tortured him so that he clasped his hands over his eyes and fled—without it—as fast as his feet could take him.

To see it lying dumb when at a touch it would say such beautiful things to him!—he ran on through the gateway and down the road with the burning temptation pursuing him as prairie flames a frightened fawn.

If anyone had had it who could have made it speak he would not have minded; but that it should lie mute there—useless—lost—hurt him with a sharper pain than Nita's hazel rods could deal.

"Oh Gemma—almost I stole it!" he gasped, panting and breathless with the horror of himself, as he stumbled up against the pretty chair on the green strip that runs under the old [illegible]

wall, where the breaches made by the Spanish assaults are filled in with ivy, and the ropemakers walk to and fro, weaving their strands under the ruined bastions.

Gemma put her finger in her mouth and looked at him.

"Why not quite?" she said. Gemma had stolen many things in her day, and had always been forgiven because she was so pretty.

"Oh, Gemma, I did—so nearly!" he murmured, unheeding her answer in the confusion of his own new stricken sense of peril and escape.

"Was it to eat?" said Gemma.

"To eat?"

He echoed her words without knowing what he said. Two great tears were rolling down his cheeks. He was so grateful that strength for resistance had been given him; and yet, he was thinking of a song* of the country to a lute; which

* Oh quanto suoni bene chitarruzza!
Le tui corde si possono indorare!
Lo manico diventi una fanciulla!
E dove io vada ti posso menare
Ch' io ti posso menar da qui a Roma
E monti e sassi t 'abbiano a inchinare!

TUSCAN SERENADE.

sings of how its owner would gild its strings and wander with it even as far as Rome—mountains and rocks inclining before its silver sounds.

If only he could have that beautiful strange thing, he thought, how he would roam the world over fearing nothing, or how happy he would lie down among the sheep and the pines, for ever making music to the winds.

"Why did you not take it, if nobody was by to see," said Gemma.

"Oh dear, it is wicked to thieve," said Signa, drearily. "Wicked, you know, and mean."

Gemma put out her lower lip.

"If no one know, it is all right," she said, with accurate perception of the world's standard of virtue.

Signa sighed heavily, his head hung down; he hardly heard her; he was thinking of the violin.

"You are a mammamia," said Gemma, with calm scorn, meaning he was a baby and very silly. "When I wish to do a thing, I do it."

"But you do very wrong things sometimes."

Gemma shrugged her little white shoulders up to her ears.

"It is nice to do wrong," she said, placidly.

"They *say* things are wrong you know," she added, after a pause. "But that is only to keep us quiet. It is all words."

They called her stupid, but she noticed many facts and drew many conclusions. This was one of them; and it was alike agreeable to her and useful. She was a naughty child, but was naughty with logic and success.

"If only he would let me touch it once," murmured Signa.

Gemma finding him such bad company went away hopping on one foot, and wondering why boys were such silly creatures.

"What is the matter?" said one of the ropemakers kindly to the boy. "Do you want to see the puppet show that came in this morning? Here is a copper bit if you do."

Signa put his hands behind his back.

"Oh no, it is not that. You are very good, but it is not that."

"Take what you can get another time," said the ropemaker, offended and yet glad that his too generous offer had been repulsed by him.

"What an ass you are! The puppets are splendid," hissed Toto, who was near, and who had spent an hour in the forenoon, squeezed between the tent-pegs of the forbidden paradise, flat on his stomach, swallowing the dust. "They are half an arm's length high, and there are three kings in it, and they murder one another just like life—so beautiful! You might have taken the money, surely, and given it to me. I shall tell mother; see then if you get any fritters for a week!"

"I did not want to see the puppets," said Signa, wearily, and walked away.

It was late in the day; he had worked hard, running into the city and back on an errand; he was tired and listless and unhappy.

As he went thinking of the violin by the walls, not noticing where his steps took him, he passed a little group of strangers. They were travellers who had wandered out there for the day. One of them was reading in a book, and looked up as the child passed.

"What a pity the Lastra is forgotten by the world!" the reader said to his companions; he

was thinking of the many memories which the old castello shuts within her walls as manuscripts are shut in coffers.

Signa heard; and flushed with pain up to the curls of his flying hair.

He said nothing, for he was shy, and, besides, was never very sure that people would not take him to Nita for a thrashing; they so often did. But he went on his way with a swelling heart. It hurt him like a blow. To others it was only a small, ancient, desolate place filled with poor people, but to him it was as Zion to the Hebrew children.

"If I could be very great, if I could write beautiful things as Pergolesi did, and all the world heard them and treasured them, then praising me, they would remember the Lastra," he thought.

A dim, sweet, impossible ambition entered into him, for the first time; the ambition of a child, gorgeous and vague, and out of all realms of likelihood; visions all full of gold and colour, with no perspective or reality about them, like a picture of the twelfth century,

in which he saw himself, a man grown, laurel-crowned and white-robed, brought into the Lastra, as the old Sacristan told him Petrarca was taken into Rome; with the rays of the sun of his fame gilding its ancient ways, whilst all Italy chanted his melodies and all the earth echoed his name.

"If I could but be what Pergolesi was!" he thought.

Pergolesi who consumed his soul in high endeavour, and died, at five-and-twenty, of a broken heart!

But then he knew nothing of that; he only knew that Pergolesi was a great dead creature, whose name was written on the scores of the Stabat and the Salve Regina which he loved as he loved the roll of thunder and the rose of sunrise; and he knew that it was he who had written that "*Se circa se dice*," which he had learned in the dusky organ-loft of the Misericordia; that song in which the great poet and the great musician together poured forth the passion of a divine despair, the passion which, in its deepest woe and highest pain, thinks but of saving the creature that it suffers for:

"Ah no! si gran duolo
Non darle per me!"

He did not know anything about him, but looked up at the sun, which was sinking downward faintly in the dreamy warmth of the pale green west, and wondered where Pergolesi was, beyond those realms of light, those beams of glory?

Was he chanting the Salve Regina there?

Between him and the radiance of the setting sun stood the little figure of Gemma, her hair all aflame with the light; hair like Titian's Magdalen and Slave and Venus, like the hair that Bronzino has given to the Angel who brings the tidings of the Annunciation, carrying the spray of lilies in his hand.

"Oh, you mammamia!" she cried, in derision, stopping short, with her brown little sister bowed down beside her under the weight of some earthen pots that they had been sent to buy in the Lastra.

"Oh, you mammamia!" cried Gemma, munching a S. Michael's summer pear that some one had given her in the Lastra for the sake of her pretty little round face with its angelic eyes.

Signa took Palma's flower-pots on his own back, and smiled back at Gemma.

"I have nothing to do before bedtime," he said: "I will carry these up for you."

"And then we can play in the garden," said Gemma, jumping off her rosy feet as she finished the pear. "But what were you thinking of? staring at the clouds?"

"Of a dead man that was a very great man, dear, I think, and made beautiful music."

"Only that!" said Gemma, with a pout of her pretty lips; throwing away her pear stalk.

"Tell me about him," said Palma.

"I do not know anything," said Signa, sadly. "He has left half his soul in the music and the other half must be—there."

He looked up again into the west.

The two little girls walked along in the dust, one on each side of him; Palma wished he would not think so of dead people; Gemma was pondering on the veiled glories of the puppets, of whose exploits Toto had told her marvels.

"Oh, Signa! if we could only see the *burat-*

tini!" she murmured, as they trotted onward; she had been sighing her heart out before the tent.

"The *burattini?*" said Signa. "Yes. Gian Lambrochini would have given me the money to go; but I would as soon hear the geese hiss or the frogs croak."

"You might have gone in—really *in?*—and seen them, murders and all?" said Gemma, with wide-opened eyes of amazement.

"Yes."

"Money to go in!—to go in!—And you did not take the money even!"

"No; I did not wish to go."

"But you might have given it to *me!* *I* might have gone!"

The enormity of her loss and of his folly overcame her. She stood in the road and stared blankly at him.

"That would not have been fair to the Lambrochini," said Palma, who was a sturdy little maiden as to right and wrong.

"No—and he so poor himself, and so old!" said Signa. "It would not have fair, Gemma."

"If you were fond of me, would you think of what was 'fair?' You would think of amusing me. It is a shame of you, Signa—a burning shame! And longing to see those puppets as I have done—crying my eyes out before the tent! It is wicked."

"Dear, I am sorry," murmured Signa. "But, indeed—indeed, I never thought of you."

"And never thought of all you might have got with the money!"

Gemma twisted herself on one side, putting up her plump little shoulders, sullenly, into her ears, with a scowl on her face.

It cost a whole coin—ten centimes—to go in to even the cheapest standing-places in the theatre, and with a whole coin you could get a big round sweet cake for five centimes, and for another centime a handful of melon-seeds, and for another a bit of chocolate, and for another two figs, and for the fourth and fifth and last a painted saint in sugar. And he might have brought all those treasures to her!

Gemma, between her two companions, felt the immeasurable disdain of the practical intelli-

gence for the idle dreamer and the hypercritical moralist. She trotted on in the dust sulkily; a little rosy and auburn figure in the shadows, as if she were a Botticelli cherub put into life and motion.

"You are cross, dear!" said Signa, with a sigh, putting his hand round her throat to caress her back into content. But Gemma shook him off, and trotted on alone in outraged dignity.

They climbed the steep ascent of grassy and broken ground past the parish church, with the sombre convent above amongst its cypresses, and the wilder hills with their low woodland growth green and dark and fresh against the south, and then entered the great gardens of Giovoli, where Sandro Zanobetto worked all the years of his life amongst the lemons and magnolia trees.

The villa was uninhabited; but the gardens were cultivated by its owner, and the flowers and fruits were sent into the city market, and in the winter down to Rome.

"Are you cross still, Gemma?" said Signa, when he had put the big pots down in the tool-

house. Gemma glanced at him with her forefinger in her mouth.

"Will you play? What shall we play at?" said Signa, coaxingly. "Come! It shall be anything you like to choose. Palma does not mind."

Gemma took her finger out of her mouth and pointed to some Alexandrian apricots golden and round against the high wall opposite them.

"Get me four big ones and I will play."

"Oh, Gemma!" cried Palma, piteously. "Those are the very best, the Alexandrian S. Johns for the padrone!"

"I know," said Gemma.

"But the fattore counted them this very morning and knows every one there is, and will blame father if one be gone, and father will beat Signa or make Nita beat him!"

"Besides, it is stealing, Gemma," said Signa.

"Chè!" said little Gemma, with unmeasured scorn. "You can climb there, Signa?"

"Yes, I can climb; but you do not wish me to do wrong to please you, dear?"

"Yes, I do," said Gemma.

"Oh, Gemma, then I cannot!" murmured Signa, sadly. "If it were only myself—but it *is* wrong, dear, and your father would be blamed. Palma is right."

"Chè!" said Gemma, again, with her little red mouth thrust out. "Will you go and get them, Signa?"

"No," said Signa.

"Tista!" cried Gemma, with her sweetest little chirp, and flew through the twilight fragrance. "Tista! Tista! Tista!"

Tista was Giovanni Baptista, the twelve-year-old son of a fellow-labourer of Giovoli, who lived on the other side of the wall; a big brown boy, who was her slave.

Signa ran after her.

"No, No! Gemma, come back!"

Gemma glanced over her shoulder.

"Tista will get them, and he will swing me in the big trees afterwards."

"No! Gemma, listen—come back! Gemma—listen; I will get them."

Gemma stood still, and laughed.

"Get them first, then I will come back; but Tista will do as well as you. And he swings me better. He is bigger."

Signa climbed up the wall, bruising his arms and wounding his feet, for the stones of it were sharp, and there was hardly any foothold; but, with some effort he got the apricots and dropped to the ground with them, and ran to Gemma.

"Here! Now you will not go to Tista? But, oh, Gemma, why make me do such a thing? It is a wrong thing—it is very wrong!"

"I did not make you do anything," said Gemma, receiving the fruit into her skirt. "I did not make you. I said Tista would do as well."

Signa was silent.

She did not even thank him. She did not even offer to share the spoils. He was no nearer her good graces than he had been before he had sinned to please her.

"Oh, Signa! I never, never would have believed!" murmured Palma, ready to cry, and powerless to act.

"She wished it so. She would have gone to

Tista," said Signa, and stood and watched the little child eating the fruit with all the pretty pecking ardour of a chaffinch. Gemma laughed as she sat down upon the grass to enjoy her stolen goods at fuller ease. When she had got her own way, all her good-humour returned.

"What sillies you are!" she said, looking at the tearful eye of her sister, and at Signa standing silent in the shade.

"It is you who are cruel, Gemma," said Palma, and went, with her little black head hung down, into the house, because, though she was only ten years old, she was the mistress of it, and had to cook and sweep and wash, and hoe the cabbages and bake the bread, or else the floors remained filthy and the hungry boys shirtless and unfed.

Gemma did not know that she was cruel. She was anything that served her purpose best and brought her the most pleasure—that was all.

She ate her apricots with the glee of a little mouse eating a bit of cheese. Signa watched her. It was all the recompense he had.

He knew that he had been weak, and had

done wrong, because the fruit trees were under Sandro's charge, who had no right to any of it, being a man paid by the week, and without any share in what he helped to cultivate; and this on the south wall being the very choicest of it all, Sandro had threatened his children with dire punishment if they should dare even to touch what should fall.

When she had eaten the last one, Gemma jumped up. Signa caught her.

"You will kiss me now, and come and play? There is just half an hour."

But Gemma twisted herself away, laughing gleefully.

"No; I shall go and swing with Tista."

"Oh, Gemma! when you promised——"

"I never promised," said Gemma.

"You said you would come back."

Gemma laughed her merriest at his face of astonished reproach.

"I did come back; but I am going again. Tista swings better than you."

And with her little carols of laughter rippling away among the leaves, Gemma ran off and

darted through a low door and banged it behind her, and called aloud:

"Tista! Tista! Come and swing me!"

In a few moments on the other side above the wall her little body curled upon the rope, and her sunny head, as yellow as a marigold, were seen flying in a semicircle up into the boughs of the high magnolia trees, while she laughed on and called louder:

"Higher, higher, Tista!—higher!"

Signa could see her, and could hear—that was all the reward he had.

He sat down disconsolate near the old broken statue by the water-lilies.

He was too proud to follow her and to dispute with Tista.

"I will not waste another hour on her—ever!" he thought, with bitterness in his heart. There were the lute and the music in the quiet sacristy; and old fragrant silent hills so full of dreams for him; and Bruno, who loved him and never cheated him; and the nightingales that told him a thousand stories of their lives amongst the myrtles; and the stones of the Lastra that

had the tales of the great dead written on them:—when he had all these, why should he waste his few spare precious minutes on this faithless, saucy, sulky, ungrateful little child?

His heart was very heavy as he heard her laughter. She had made him do wrong, and then had mocked at him and left him.

"I will never think about her, never any more!" he said to himself while the shadows darkened and the bats flew out and the glow-worms twinkled, and in the dusk he could still just see the golden head of Gemma flying in the bronzed leaves of the magnolias.

After a while her laughter and her swinging ceased.

The charm of perfect silence fell on the grand old garden. He sat on, soothed and yet sorrowful. The place was beautiful to him, even without Gemma.

In the garden of these children all the flora of Italy was gathered and was growing.

The delights of an Italian garden are countless. It is not like any other garden in the world. It is at once more formal and more

wild, at once greener with more abundant youth and venerable with more antique age. It has all Boccaccio between its walls, all Petrarca in its leaves, all Raffaelle in its skies. And then the sunshine that beggars words and laughs at painters! — the boundless, intense, delicious, heavenly light! What do other gardens know of that, save in orange-groves of Granada and rose-thickets of Damascus?

The old broken marble statues, whence the water dripped and fed the water-lily; the great lemon-trees in pots big enough to drown a boy, the golden globes among their emerald leaves; the magnolias, like trees cast in bronze, with all the spice of India in their cups; the spires of ivory bells that the yuccas put forth, like belfries for fairies; the oleanders taller than a man, red and white and blush colour; the broad velvet leaves of the flowering rush; the dark majestic ilex oaks, that made the noon like twilight; the countless graces of the vast family of acacias; the high box hedges, sweet and pungent in the sun; the stone ponds, where the gold-fish slept through the sultry day; the wilderness of carna-

tions; the huge roses, yellow, crimson, snow-white, and the small noisette and the banksia with its million of pink stars; myrtles in dense thickets, and camellias like a wood of evergreens; cacti in all quaint shapes, like fossils astonished to find themselves again alive; high walls, vine-hung and topped by pines and cypresses; low walls with crowds of geraniums on their parapets, and the mountains and the fields beyond them; marble basins hidden in creepers where the frogs dozed all day long; sounds of convent bells and of chapel chimes; green lizards basking on the flags; great sheds and granaries beautiful with the clematis and the wisteria and the rosy trumpets of the bignonia; great wooden places cool and shady, with vast arched entrances, and scent of hay, and empty casks, and red earthen amphoræ, and little mice scudding on the floors, and a sun-dial painted on the wall, and a crucifix set above the weathercock, and through the huge unglazed windows sight of the green vines with the bullocks in the harvest-carts beneath them, or of some hilly sunlit road with a mule-team coming down it, or of a blue high

hill with its pine-trees black against the sky, and on its slopes the yellow corn and misty olive. This was their garden; it is ten thousand other gardens in the land.

The old painters had these gardens, and walked in them, and thought nothing better could be needed for any scene of Annunciation or Adoration, and so put them in beyond the windows of Bethlehem or behind the Throne of the Lamb—and who can wonder?

The mighty lives have passed away into silence, leaving no likeness to them on earth; but if you would still hold communion with them, even better than to go to written score or printed book or painted panel or chiselled marble or cloistered gloom, is it to stray into one of these old quiet gardens, where for hundreds of years the stone naiad has leaned over the fountain, and the golden lizard hidden under the fallen caryatide, and sit quite still, and let the stones tell you what they remember and the leaves say what the sun once saw; and then the shades of the great dead will come to you. Only you must love them truly, else you will see them never.

Signa, in his little ignorant way, did love them with just such blind untaught love as a little bird born in a dark cage has for the air and the light.

When he stole into the deserted villas, where, after centuries of neglect, some fresco would glow still upon the damp walls where the cobwebs and the wild vine had their way; when he saw the sculptured cornices and the gilded fretwork and the broken mosaic in the halls where cattle were stabled and grain piled; when he knelt down before the dusky nameless Madonnas in the little churches on the hills, or found some marble head lying amongst the wild thyme, the boy's heart moved with a longing and a tenderness to which he could have given no title.

As passion yet unknown thrills in the adolescent, as maternity yet undreamed of stirs in the maiden; so the love of art comes to the artist before he can give a voice to his thought or any name to his desire.

Signa heard "beautiful things" as he sat in the rising moonlight, with the bells of the little bindweed white about his feet.

That was all he could have said.

Whether the angels sent them on the breeze, or the birds brought them, or the dead men came and sang them to him, he could not tell. Indeed, who can tell?

Where did Guido see the golden hair of S. Michael gleam upon the wind? Where did Mozart hear the awful cries of the risen dead come to judgment? What voice was in the fountain of Vaucluse? Under what nodding oxlip did Shakespeare find Titania asleep? When did the Mother of Love come down, chaster in her unclothed loveliness than vestal in her veil, and with such vision of her make obscure Cleomenes immortal?

Who can tell?

Signa sat dreaming, with his chin upon his hands, and his eyes wandering over all the silent place, from the closed flowers at his feet to the moon in her circles of mist.

Who walks in these paths now may go back four hundred years. They are changed in nothing. Through their high hedges of rhododendron and of jessamine that grow like woodland trees it

would still seem but natural to see Raffaelle with his court-train of students, or Signorelli splendid in those apparellings which were the comment of his age; and on these broad stone terraces with the lizards basking on their steps and the trees opening to show a vine-covered hill with the white oxen creeping down it and the blue mountains farther still behind, it would be but fitting to see a dark figure sitting and painting lilies upon a golden ground, or cherubs' heads upon a panel of cypress wood, and to hear that this painter was the monk Angelico.

The deepest charm of these old gardens, as of their country, is, after all, that in them it is possible to forget the present age.

In the full, drowsy, voluptuous noon, when they are a gorgeous blaze of colour and a very intoxication of fragrance, as in the ethereal white moonlight of midnight, when, with the silver beams and the white blossoms and the pale marbles, they are like a world of snow, their charm is one of rest, silence, leisure, dreams, and passion all in one; they belong to the days when art was a living power, when love was a

thing of heaven or of hell, and when men had the faith of children and the force of gods.

Those days are dead, but in these old gardens you can believe still that you live in them.

The boy, who did not know hardly why he was moved by it so greatly, musing in this garden of Giovoli, and sitting watching the glow-worms in the ground bindweed, was more than half consoled for the cruelty of his playmate. When the nine o'clock chimes rang down below in the Lastra, he did not move; he had forgotten that if he were away when Nita should shut her house up he would have another beating and no supper.

How often was Giotto scolded for letting the sheep stray?

Very often, no doubt.

When the moon had quite risen, with a ring of mist round her, because there was rain hanging in the air, little feet ran over the bindweed, and a little rosy face, all the prettier for the shadows that played in its eyes and the watery radiance that shone in its curls, looked up into his with saucy merriment.

A little piping voice ran like a cricket's chirp into the stillness.

"You may swing me to-morrow—do you hear?"

Signa started, roused from his musing.

The beautiful things were mute; the clouds and the leaves told him nothing more. He was only a little barefooted boy, vexed at being left alone and jealous of big brown Tista.

Gemma was a pretty sulky baby, with a pert tongue and a sturdy will of her own; a little thing that could not read a letter, and cared for nothing but for eating and for play; but there were shadowed out in her the twin foes of all genius—the Woman and the World.

"Are you sulking here?" said Gemma. "Tista swung me so high!—so high! Much better than you. You must get out of the garden now; father is come to lock the gates."

Signa got up slowly.

"Good-night, Gemma."

"Good-night, Gemma!" echoed the child, mimicking the sadness of his answer. "Oh, how stupid you are! Just like Palma! Tista has

more life in him, only he never has anything for one except those little green apples. You may come and swing me to-morrow, if you like."

"No; you love Tista."

"But I love you best."

She whispered it with all the wooing archness and softness of twenty years instead of ten, with the moonbeams shining in her eyes till they looked like wet cornflowers.

Signa was silent. He knew she did not love him, but only his pears that he got for her from Bruno, or his baked cakes that he coaxed for her from old Teresina.

"You will come to-morrow?" said Gemma, slipping her hand into his.

"You will flout me if I do come."

"No," said Gemma.

"Yes, you will. It is always like that."

"Try," said Gemma; and she kissed him.

"I will come," said Signa; and he went away through the dewy darkness, forgetting the stolen apricots and the choice of Tista. It was so very seldom that she would kiss him, and she looked so pretty in the moonlight.

Gemma glanced after him through the bars of the high iron gate with the japonica and jessamine twisting round its coronet.

Tista was going away on the morrow into the city to be bound 'prentice to a shoemaker, who was his mother's cousin, and had offered to take him cheaply.

But it had not been worth while to tell Signa that.

"There would have been nobody to swing me if I had not coaxed him," thought Gemma; "and perhaps he will bring me one of those big sweet pears of Bruno's."

And the little child, well contented, ran off under her father's shrill scolding for being out so late, and went indoors and drank a draught of milk that Palma had begged for her from a neighbour who had a cow, and slipped herself out of her little blue shift and homespun skirt, and curled herself up on her bed of hay and fell fast asleep, looking like a sculptor's sleeping Love.

CHAPTER XI.

A FEW days later fell the feast of SS. Peter and Paul, and Signa for more than half a year had been promised a great treat.

Bruno had said that on that day he would take him to see the marble men and the painted angels of the Certosa Monastery, some ten miles away along the bend of the green Greve water.

What Bruno promised he did always; the child had the surest faith in his word; and by five o'clock in the fair sunrise of the June morning, Signa slipped down the dark staircase, and undid the door and ran out bareheaded into the sweet cold air, and stood waiting on the stones.

The Madonna of Good Council smiled on him through her wooden wicket; bells were ringing

over the country around; some tender hand had already placed before the shrine a fresh bunch of field flowers; the sky was red with the rose of the daybreak.

He had not waited long before a tall figure turned the corner, and Bruno's shadow fell upon the slope.

"You are ready? That is right," he said, and without more words the child ran on by his side out of the lofty Fiorentina gate.

The morning was fresh and radiant, very cold, as it always is in midsummer, before the sun has warmed the earth and drunk up the deep night dews that drench the soil.

The shutters of the houses were unclosing and through the open doors, and in the darkness of the cellars there was the yellow gleam of wheat, cut and waiting for the threshers; the gardens and yards were yellow, too, with piles of straw-hats wetted and drying; the shadows were broad and black; men were beginning their work in the great arched smithies and workshops; there was everywhere the smell of the wet earth refreshed and cooled by night.

They went along the road that leads to the Greve river;—past the big stone barns where the flails would be at rest all day for sake of good SS. Peter and Paul; past the piles of timber and felled fir-trees that strewed the edge of the road; past the old grey villa of the Della Stufa who nigh a thousand years before had come over the mountains, Christian knights and gallant gentlemen, with their red cross and their tawny lions on their shields; the chapel bell was calling the scattered cotters of Castagnolo to first mass; past the pretty bridge of the Stagno (the pool) with its views of the far mountains, and the poplar-trees that the Latins named so because of the restlessness of their leaves, like the unresting mob; past the great fortress of the Castel Pucci, once built to hurl defiance at the city itself, now white and silent, sheltering in its walls the woeful pain, and yet more woeful joys, of minds diseased; past the worthy barber's shop, where it is written up that he has only painted his sign with the tricolour to quiet tasteless whirligigs, he being a man of humour, with a pity kindred to contempt for all the weathercock

vagaries of politics; past the old dirty, tumble-down, wayside houses, where the floors were strewn with the new straw picked for the plaiting, and the babies were lying in flat fruit-baskets, swaddled and laughing, and the girls were getting ready for mass with bright petticoats and braided hair and big earrings, and, if they were betrothed maidens, strings of pearls about their throats; past all these till they came to the Greve bridge, where they met a priest with the Host in the brightness of the festal day-dawn.

They uncovered their heads and knelt down in the dust and prayed for the passing soul till the little bell, borne before the holy man, had tinckled away in the distance. Then they walked on by the Greve water under the shivering poplars and amongst the grazing sheep.

There is no regular path along the river; but they made one for themselves, brushing through the canes, getting round the rushes, or when it was needed, wading knee-deep, or oftener, for the water was low, walking in the stony sand of the dry river bed.

Once it was a warlike water enough, in the old days when the Lotteringhi and Alberti, and Acciajoli and Pandolfini, and all the other great races, Guelph and Ghibelline, had their fortified places bristling along its banks; when its stone landing quays were crowded with condottieri watering their horses ere they went to lend their lances to the strongest; when mighty nobles in penitence raised shrines and built hospitals beside it to seek God's grace upon their arms; when the long lines of pilgrims wound along it, or the creeping files of sumpter mules, or the bright array of the White Company; in those days Greve was a busy stream, and was as often as not made red with the blood let out in many a skirmish or the reflected flames from a castle fired in feud.

But all that is of the past. Now it is only a millrace, a washing pool, a ford, a fishing burn, anything the people liked to make of it; it sees nothing but the miller's mules or the grape waggons, or the women with their piles of white linen; and the only battles it beholds are the fighting of the frogs in the canebrake or of the

tree sparrows in the air. Now the Greve is a simple pastoral river. No one has ever sung of it that one knows. It lies so near to the Arno, held dear by every poet and made sacred by every art, that the little Greve is as a daisy set beside a crown diamond; and no one thinks of it.

Yet perhaps—only one dare not say so for one's life—perhaps it has as much real loveliness as Arno has. It has the same valley—it has the same mountains—it is encompassed by the same scenes and memories; and it has a sylvan beauty, all of its own, like Wye's or Dart's or Derwent's.

Grassy banks where the sheep browse; tall poplars, great oaks, rich walnuts, firs, and maples, and silver larch, and the beautiful cercis that blossoms all over in a night; calm stretches of green water, with green hills that lock it in; old water-mills, half hidden in maize and dog-grass and plumy reeds; broken ground above with winding roads from which the mule bells echo now and then; steep heights, golden with grain, or fragrant with hay, and dusky with

the dark emerald leaf of the innumerable vines; deep sense of coolness, greenness, restfulness everywhere; and then, where the river's windings meet its sister stream the Ema, set in a narrow gorge between two hills, yet visible all along the reaches of the water while far off, the monastery of the Carthusians—the Certosa—ending all the sweet song of peace with a great hymn to God.

This is the Greve—with flowering rushes in it, and the sun in its water till it glows like emeralds, and goats going down to drink, and here and there a woman cutting the green canes, and dragon-flies and swallows on the wing, and oxen crossing the flat timber bridge, and from the woods and rocks above the sound of chapel bells and reapers' voices falling through the air, softly as dropping leaves.

Bruno and the child kept always along the course of the water, walking in its bed or climbing its banks as necessity made them.

Bruno was never a man of many words; the national loquacity was not his; he was fierce, sudden, taciturn, but he smiled on the little lad's

esctacies, and though he could tell him none of the ten thousand things that Signa wished to know, yet he said nothing that did not suit the joyous and poetic mood of the child; for though Bruno was an ignorant man, except in husbandry, Love is sympathy, and Sympathy is intelligence in a strong degree.

Signa was wildly happy; leaping from stone to stone; splashing in the shallow water with a jump; calling to the gossipping frogs; flinging the fir-apples in the air; clapping his hands as the field-mice peeped out from the lines of cut grain; wondering where the poppies were all gone that a week before had "run like torchmen with the wheat."

Once, his hands filled with blossoms and creepers from the hedges, he stopped to gather a little blue cornflower that had outlived the corn as mortals do their joys.

"Why is it called St. Stephen's crown?" he asked.

"How should I tell?" said Bruno; for indeed it seemed to him the silliest name that could be.

"Do you think it saw when they stoned him, and was sorry?" said Signa.

"How should a flower see? You talk foolishness."

"Flowers see the sun."

"That is foolish talk."

"And the moon, too, else how could they keep time, and shut and go to bed? And somebody must have named them all—who was it?"

Bruno was silent. Cattle liked dried flowers in their hay, and horses would not eat them; that was all he knew about them, and when the child persisted, answered him:

"The saints, most likely."

But he said within himself:

"If only the boy would pull off lizards' tails, or snare birds, like other boys, instead of asking such odd questions that make one think him hardly sensible sometimes!"

Signa, a little pacified, gathered his hands full, and ran on, puzzling his little brain in silence. He had a fancy that St. John had named them all one day out of gladness of heart

when Christ had kissed him. That was what he thought, running by the Greve water.

Who did indeed first name the flowers? Who first gave them, not their Latin titles, but the old, familiar, fanciful, poetic, rustic ones that run so curiously alike in all the different vulgar tongues?

Who first called the lilies of the valley the Madonna's tears; the wild blue hyacinth St. Dorothy's flower? Who first called the red clusters of the oleander St. Joseph's nosegays, and the clematis by her many lovely titles, consolation, traveller's joy, virgin's bower? Who gave the spiderwort to St. Bruno; the black briony for Our Lady's Seal; the corn-feverfew to St. Anne; the common bean to St. Ignatius the bane-berry to St. Christopher; the blue valerian to Jacob for his angel's ladder; the toywort to the shepherds for their purse? Who first called the nyctanthes the tree of sadness; and the starry passiflora the Passion of Christ? Who first made dedication of the narcissus to remembrance; the amaranthus to wounded, bleeding love; the scabius to the

desolation of widowhood? Who named them all first in the old days that are forgotten?

It is strange that most of these tender old appellatives are the same in meaning in all European tongues. The little German madchen in her pinewoods, and the Tuscan contadina in her vineyards, and the Spanish child on the sierras, and the farm-girl on the purple English moorlands, and the soft-eyed peasant that drives her milch cows through the sunny evening fields of France, all gathering their blossoms from wayside green or garden wall, give them almost all the same old names with the same sweet pathetic significance. Who gave them first?

Milton and Spenser and Shelley, Tasso and Schiller and Camoens—all the poets that ever the world has known, might have been summoned together for the baptism of the flowers, and have failed to name them half so well as popular tradition has done, long ago in the dim lost ages, with names that still make all the world akin.

Meanwhile the man and boy came to a wooden bridge that bullocks were crossing, with flowers in their frontlets and red tassels. There was a

broken arch beyond of a bridge that Greve had thrown down in flood. The reaped wheat was lying on the hills. The long cool grass tossed about to the water's edge. Children were fishing in the shallows.

Up above there was an open space, with a house that had a green bough over its door, and men drinking, and mules resting with their noses in fresh cut cane leaves. Here they left the bed of the stream, and went up on the high path that goes along the wooded heights with the bold green bluffs on either side, and the vines below, and the river under the aspens between them.

They went along the path which is hardly more than a mule and ox track, rising higher and higher, with the blue mountains behind them, through the blackberry brambles and the starry clematis, and the wild myrtle, and the innumerable hill flowers of all hues, and past a rambling farm-house called Assinaria, with old arched doorways, and a boy drawing water by a rope, standing in a high unglazed window, with blue shirt and brown limbs, against the dark behind him, like a figure painted upon an oaken

panel; and then ancle-deep through the sea of yellow corn strewn all about around the place awaiting threshing, and out on to a knoll of rock set thick with rosemary, and so on in view of the Certosa.

The Certosa, afar off, above the stream with the woods in front beneath it, so that it seemed lifted on a forest throne of verdure against the morning splendour of the east; as he saw it, Signa was still a minute, and drew a deep, long breath.

Approached from the Roman road the monastery is nothing; a pile of buildings, irregular, and only grand by its extent, on a bare crest of rock; but approached from the Greve river, when the morning sun, shining behind it, shrouds its vast pile in golden mist, and darkens the wooded valley at its feet, the monastery is beautiful, and all the faith and the force of the age that begot it are in it: it is a Te Deum in stone.

"It looks as if the angels fought there," said Signa, with hushed awe, as he stood on the sward and made the sign of the cross; and indeed it has a look as of a fortress, Acciajoli,

when he raised and consecrated it, having prayed the Republic to let him make it war-proof and braced for battle.

"Men fight the devil there," said Bruno, believing what he said.

The chimes of the monastery were ringing out for the first mass; deep bells and of sweet tone, that came down the river like a benediction on the day.

Signa kneeled down in the grass.

"Did you pray for the holy men?" Bruno asked him when they rose, and they went on under the tall, green, quivering trees.

"No," said Signa, under his breath. "I prayed for the devil."

"*For* him!" echoed Bruno aghast, "what are you about, child? are you possessed? do you know what the good priests would say?"

"I prayed for him," said Signa, with that persistency which ran with his docile temper. "It is he who wants it. To be wicked *there* where God is, and the sun, and the bells."

"But he is the foe of God. It is horrible to pray for him."

"No," said Signa, sturdily. "God says we are to forgive our enemies and help them. I only asked him to begin with His."

Bruno was silent. He did not know what to say to the boy. The devil to him was a terrible reality; had he not seen him with his black, foul deformity and flame-vomiting jaws on the frescoed walls, whenever he had entered any church in the heat of noon, to sit a little and turn his face to the pillars, and hear the murmurs of low mass in some side chapel?

The devil lived in the flesh for Bruno; the devil had made him stab Pippa; the devil was always in the fire of his tongue, and in the haste of his hand; and these holy painters of the church had surely seen the devil in the flesh, or how could they ever have portrayed him?

"Pray for those the devil enters, carino," he said, sadly. "When you have done with them it will be time to pray for him, and they count by tens of thousands."

"It is best to pray for him, himself," said Signa, with his docile determination to keep his own ideas which Nita so constantly endeavoured

to thrash out of him. "Perhaps men made him bad, because they would not leave him any hope of being better."

"Do not talk of those things, the priests would not like it, Signa," said Bruno, to whom such a manner of speaking of Satan seemed impious—only the child was so young—heaven, he trusted, would not be angry.

Signa was silent; he obeyed an order always; only he kept his own ideas; it was as a dog obeys a call, but keeps its instincts.

But his joyous chatter was subdued. He kept looking up at the great monastery above the woods, that was all in a glow of sunlight, and where men fought the devil, and, perhaps, saw God.

"I would not fight him," he thought to himself. "I would just bring him out, and tell him to look down the river, and I think he would take no more pleasure in hell then."

And he fancied he saw golden-haired Michael and the angel that was called Gabriel leading the dark incarnate Sin out there, into the light, till the sun changed his sable wings to silver.

Satan was as real to him as to Bruno; only he felt sorry for him, always sorry, when he heard the priests talk of him and saw the old terrible pictures on the walls of all the woe he wrought and the devouring flames.

Signa had thought a great deal about all these things—sitting in the dusky aisle with his hand telling his beads and his little hot feet on the cold pavement, while they droned out the mass.

There were other country people waiting to go in; the peasants love these places; you will see them very often in little groups, hushed and yet happy, wandering very quietly through the aisles of the churches or monasteries, or sitting against the columns or in the shade on the altar steps. Though they are a mirthful people at times, and like their lotteries and dominoes and whirling dances and gossiping jokes, there is something in the solemn rest, in the serious dusky stillness, that suits them strangely; the houses of God are really to them abodes of rest; they take their tired limbs there and get repose actual as well as figurative; perhaps they do not think about anything, but sit in a sort of day sleep

when their prayers are done; but the influence of the place is with them and their love for it is true.

A white-frocked brother met them in the long vaulted passage-way, looking as though he had stepped out from some canvas of Del Sarto's, and they went in with the five other contadini waiting there; Bruno, with his brown cloak on one shoulder and a clean shirt, and the child in rough white linen with a carnation at his throat; a flower in the ear or at the throat is seen here so often with bare legs and feet.

Signa, awe-stricken and full of the beauty of the place, was mute as they strayed through its cloisters and crypt, and followed the white-frocked brother, and passed other monks kneeling wrapt in prayer or meditation. Only when he came to where the old bishop lies asleep in the wonderful marble of Francesco di San Gallo he was moved by a sudden impulse, and plucked the end of Bruno's cloak.

"I should like to sing him something," he whispered.

"Sing? to whom?"

"To that old man," said Signa, and then coloured, ashamed of himself.

"His soul is in heaven, he would be angered," said Bruno, in dismay. "He hears much better singing than yours. Look! the padre is shocked at you, and in this holy place!"

Signa hung his head.

"Are you fond of singing, little fellow?" asked a stranger, who had been looking at the Perugino on the wall.

Signa nodded shyly.

"And why do you want to sing to the dead bishop?"

"Because he is only asleep," said Signa, timidly, "and it might give him pretty dreams. Old Teresina says she always has good dreams towards morning, because I go under the house singing."

"Sing, then," said the stranger, and turned to the monk with some words of entreaty.

"If it be a holy song," said the monk, with reluctant consenting.

"He sings well," said Bruno, with an outbreak of the tender pride in Signa, which he endeavoured to conceal, but could not always.

Signa was shy and silent for a minute; he wished he had not spoken of doing it, with this grand strange signore there; but the old dead man's face smiled at him, and the Holy Child in Perugino's picture seemed to look down in expectation; he forgot the living people; the bishop and the Gesu were all he saw; he joined his hands as if he were at prayer, and sang a sacrament hymn of Pergolesi that they sang in his own church.

Whether the good bishop dead five hundred years, or hard-headed honest Perugino sleeping under the wayside oak in Frontignano, heard or not, who shall say till the secret of the grave be loosed? But the contadini standing reverently by, and the white-robed monk, and the listening stranger heard, and held their breath. The monk turned his head a moment to Perugino's picture to see if it were not some miracle being wrought there, and the Angels of the Nativity singing instead of this peasant child.

Signa sang on as larks do, forgetting everything when once his voice was loosened on the air, and without knowing what he did, left the

hymn of Pergolesi, and sang on and on and on cadences that were to be traced to no written score, and that came to him, he never could tell how—just as they came upon the mountain side, with not a creature near. The words were the words of the Latin services, but the cadences were his own as much as the thrush's are its own in the hawthorn time.

He might have sang on till sunset if two other monks drawn by the unwonted sounds had not come near and looked on through the half open door. The sound stopped him; he paused startled and half ashamed; and not another note could be got from him.

"He is not angry," he whispered to Bruno, looking at the statue. "He is smiling still."

"You would make marble smile, if it had frowned through ages, till you sang," said the stranger, while the monks murmured something of a gift of God. "My pretty little boy, you may make the world hear of you, your mouth will drop gold."

Signa glanced at him bewildered; he understood nothing of this kind of language.

"Come with me where I am painting," said the stranger, "I should like to hear who taught you your perfect phrasing—who taught you to sing, I mean? Come with me a few minutes. Is that your father with you?"

"That is Bruno," said Signa. For the first time it occurred to him—why had he no father? Was he born out of the old town from the stones and ivy as the owls were?

"Not your father? What is he to you then?"

"He is always good. I keep his sheep sometimes."

The artist did not ask any more; the boy was some peasant's son; it did not matter whose. "But who taught you to sing?" he pursued.

"I sing in the churches at home."

"But have you had no teacher?"

"No," said Signa; then added, after a pause, "The birds do not have any."

"But much that you sang—it is no known music—is it composed by some village genius of whom no one has heard?"

Signa was very puzzled.

"I sing the music that I have in my head," he said, after a little while.

"Then it is you who have the genius—a second Mozart?"

Signa could not understand those words at all. Perhaps he was something wicked. Nita was always saying so.

"A genius? that is a sin?" he asked, shyly.

The artist laughed. "Yes; unless you can sell it well. A sin sold well is half forgiven."

The child did not understand, but was a little frightened. To speak of sin at all was eerie in this great place, where men all day long and all night long fought the fiend.

"I should like to paint your face," said the stranger: "as Perugino did the Holy Child's that you look at so—oh, a few lines will do, but I fancy your face will be well known to a great world one day, and you have a look in your eyes that is beautiful—can you wait?"

The child asked Bruno. Bruno was displeased, but an Italian has a respect for art and artists; he muttered unwillingly that it was a feast day, the boy might do as he liked for him;

it was a folly, but it would not hurt; it was not as if it were a girl.

The child went willingly into the room that is sacred to the Popes, and where dread Leo frowned on him. In the wide window, looking to the north on to the purple mountains, there stood an easel and other things of a painter's work; the artist being a great man, and bringing authority of governments with him, was painting that glorious view, and living in retreat there for a few days.

Bruno followed them; he would rather have preferred that strangers should leave the boy alone; he was jealous over him, and he thought that praise would make him vain.

So Signa stood in his little white shirt, with his dark curls that had the gold light in them touching his throat, and the painter painted his head and shoulders with his chest half bare, and the carnation bright against the skin.

He swept the likeness in with the fast, broad, true touches of a great artist, who with a dozen strokes can suggest a whole picture, as Rembrandt drew Jan Six's Bridge.

In half an hour he had what he wanted; a little face full of sadness and joy together, and most purely child-like, with a look in the eyes that would make women weep.

He had been waiting for such a face in his great picture of the child Demophöon in the sacred fire; for whose scene he had come to these purple hills and dreamful plains as all the old painters—and Raffaelle, in his days of wisdom—had come to these or such as these.

To move the boy to wondering interest and wake the eager, rapt look in his eyes, the painter talked to him, with easy graphic language, simple, yet eloquent, such as the child had never heard.

He told him about the flowers he loved; about the mountains; about the dead Acciajoli, whose marble effigies were in the crypt below; about Donatello, who had carved the stone warriors in their mighty rest; about Giuliano, who had sculptured the fruits and flowers there to take away all terrors from the tomb; about S. Bruno the founder, and of the far lone Alps, where he had dwelt, forbidding the sight of woman

for many a mile around; about the builder of this charter-house, gentle Orgagna, that good old man, who loved to paint Cupids frolicking with young maidens under orange boughs, and brave youths hawking under sunny skies, and yet could draw Black Death as if he feared her not, but sent her upward through the air as though, by allegory, not to leave men without hope; one of those mighty workers who could write sculptor on their canvas and painter on their marble; one of those great, rich, wise lives that make the best of our own look so barren, spent in raising great piles and colouring beautiful things, and dwelling in peace and honour, and closing tranquilly when their course was run. Orgagna was writing sonnets when he died to a young lad he loved. Sixty years old, and yet with strength and youth and faith enough, and enough freshness of heart and soul, to write a sonnet that should please a boy! These men had never been bitten in the heel by the snake of Satiety; the wound which kills the Achilles of Modern Art.

Bruno, stretched on a bench, lay still as a felled tree and listened.

"If I could talk like that to Signa he would love me better," he thought; but how was he to talk like that—a man who knew how to make barley grow, and how to drive bullocks over the land, and how to cleanse the vines with sulphur, but no more.

He wished the painter would not tell the child the world would know of him—what use was there in that. Valdarno and the hills were world enough—and were he to sing and the great unknown cities hear him, he would have to go away for that, and Bruno hoped to keep him always—always—always, and see him safe for all the future after him on that good piece of land on the hill-side, where Pippa had come through the beanflowers at sunset.

What better life was there than that, with the meek beasts on the corn-lands, high in the air amongst the vines?

Kings no doubt were higher, and great lords; but Bruno pitied them.

Two o'clock came, and the monks had their simple dinner in their refectory, and the same fare was brought to the artist as to any laity who

may dwell there in retreat, and he made them bring portions for the contadino and the child, and added wine of his own getting, rich and rare.

Bruno and Signa took it without ado, and with the simple animal-like grace which is bred in Italian blood as in the limbs of the chamois or the wings of the swallow.

He was a great man, perhaps, and rich, no doubt, and far above them; but why should they be ashamed to break his bread with him?

They would have broken theirs with him.

As for him, now he had the face he wanted—the face that he had sought for high and low amongst the beautiful children of the Riviera, and always vainly—he did not care how soon they went nor where; and yet the boy had a wonderful voice—only children were so often wonderful in Italy that no one ever heard of when they were grown to men—a precocious, swiftly passing, universal genius, that burst to beauty like a rose laurel blossom, and dropped down without fruit. Still, this little barefoot boy, that sang to the dead bishop, had something in his face that surely would not die.

"If I took you with me to the big world they would make an idol of you, little lark," he said, as the boy put down his white bowl of soup. "Would you come if I would take you?"

Signa looked up to Bruno's face and across at the hills that hid his old town from his sight.

"No," he said, simply, but his face flushed all over suddenly; a vague fancy, a dim possibility broke before him like the faint rose that is promise of the sunrise. Only he was too young and knew too little to be able to be sure of what he thought.

"No? Well, you are right," said the great painter, smiling. "To a million blanks one prize, only the prize is a proud one, once got; though the men whose hands are empty deny it, to console themselves. But be content in your life, little fellow; it is a good one; you are not like a town child, 'un brin d'herbe, sans soleil, entre deux pavés.' You have the sun and the air and the country, the old painters knew the value of these; we do not. Look here, my pretty boy, take these pieces and buy what you fancy, and if you ever do wander far afield and want help, here is my

name; come to me and remind me of the Certosa, and such influence as I have with other men I will use for you. But if you are wise you will not wander. The ox furrows are safer travelling than the city stones. Farewell."

He gave the boy two gold pieces of France, and smiled at him, and went within to the dormitory. He would not have minded the child remaining all the day, but he was tired of seeing that black-browed contadino stretched, listening and silent, on the bench. Besides, he wanted to go on with his landscape.

"Am I to keep them?" said Signa, looking down at the money in his palm.

"Money is money," said Bruno, briefly. "It is forty francs. Francs do not hang in the hedges."

Signa was silent in absolute amaze. He had never had a centime for his own in his whole life. He felt dizzy.

Then all at once he gave a ringing shout of rapturous joy.

"I could buy the violin!" he cried, till the vault of the chamber echoed.

It was to him as if he could buy the earth and the sun and the planets.

"Yes; you can buy the violin," said Bruno.

Signa laughed all over his little face as a brook does when the sun and wind together please it; he was beside himself with bewildered happiness. He shouted, he leaped, he sang, he raced, regardless of the silence and sanctity of the place, till Bruno hurried him away fearful that the good brethren might enter and be displeased.

"What did the paper say? you have forgotten the paper," said Bruno, as they passed the pharmacy, where the monks were distilling their sweet odours and strong waters with a delicate fragrance of coriander and coromandel seeds, and of dried herbs and lemons and the like, upon the air.

Signa, giddy and breathless, unfolded the crumpled scrap on which the painter had written his name with a pencil, his surname—Istriel—curtly, as men write who know that the one word tells all about them to the world.

He spelt the name out slowly, but the line beneath it puzzled him; it was only an address

in Paris, but then the little boy did not know what Paris meant.

He crushed the slip of paper together with the gold and ran out of the cool vaulted corridors, that were so still and hushed and grey, like twilight, into the path that runs down the vines.

"I can buy the violin!" he cried to the bright sky; he thought that the sky smiled back again.

After all the angels had had thought of him.

"Oh this wonderful day!" he shouted. "Oh Bruno, are you not happy that we came!"

"I am glad if you are glad," said Bruno. And that was the truth at all times. Half way down the hill Signa stopped and looked back to the monastery.

"I forgot to thank the Holy Child," he said, with sharp contrition.

"Where? and for what?"

"The little Christ in the picture that they called Perugino—he sent me this to buy the violin. I am sure of that. He smiled at me all the while I sang, and I never said a prayer to thank him. Let me go back."

"They would not let you in; say your prayers

to him at home; he will be quite as pleased. But it was the painter who gave you the money."

"It was the Holy Child sent it," said Signa, who had seen so many frescoes of the heavenly host descending to mingle in the lives of men, and had heard so many miracles and legends, that the visible interposition of Perugino's Gesu was only such a thing as he had looked for naturally.

Well, the Gesu might, why not, thought Bruno, the child was worthy even of such memory.

He did not know—it seemed presumptuous to think they could think in heaven of a child's wish for a wooden toy; but still, who could tell?—it is such simple, humble, foolish hopes as these that keep the peasants' hearts and backs from breaking under the burden of unending toil. Untiring intelligence may live best without a faith, but tired poverty and labour must have one of some sort. Called by what name it may be, it is the selfsame thing, the vague, sad, wistful hope of some far off, but certain, compensation.

To Bruno, indeed, it seemed that the Gesu had sanctioned the spending of a vast fortune on a

mere plaything; it was the cost of a sheep or of a barrel of wine; but he could no more have denied the child than he could have cut his hand off—besides, if the saints willed it.

As for Signa, he had no doubt that heaven had sent it to him. He cried and laughed in his delight. He showed his gold to the birds, to the frogs, and to the butterflies. He leaped from stone to stone in the water, laughing at his own image. He stopped to tell every contadino he met, and every fisherman throwing a net from the canes. He ran through the hedges of acacia and clematis, and told the spiders weaving silver in the leaves. He stopped to tell the millers at the mill-house over the river, where the good men leaned out of a little square window with the yellow light of a candle behind them, and above the moss-grown roof the apple boughs interlaced against a dreamy blue evening sky, like a Rembrandt set in a Raffaelle. He caught a big brown velvet stingless bee, and whispered it the story, and let it go free to carry the news before him to the swallows in the Lastra; and when he came to the red cross that stands on a

pile of stones, where the Greve is broad and green under the high woodlands, where the mighty Acciajoli once reigned, he knelt down and said the prayers he had forgotten, while the wind chased the shadows in the water, and the weir and the waterwheel sang to each other.

"Will it be too late to buy it to-night?" he said, as he saw Venus rise above the mountains from the sea.

"Not if Tonino be not in bed," said Bruno, who never could bear not to humour the child. So they walked on as fast as they could.

"You are tired?" said Bruno. "If you are tired get on my back."

"I am not tired!" laughed the child, who felt as though he had wings, and could dart all the way home as swiftly and straight as a dragon-fly. It was quite dark when they reached the Lastra.

It was a hot night. The mosquitoes and the little white moths were whirling round the few dusky lamps. There were lights behind the grated windows, and darksome doorways lit as Rembrandt loved.

The men stood about in their shirt-sleeves, and the women lingered, saying good night as they plaited the last tress. There were groups in the archways, and on the high steps, and in the bakers' and wine-sellers' shops, where the green boughs were drooping after the heat of the day. In uncurtained casements only lighted by the moon young mothers undressed their sucklings. There was a smell of ripe fruit, of drying hay, of fir-apples, of fresh straw, of that sea-scent which comes here upon the west wind, and of magnolia flowers from the villas on the hills.

Signa's heart beat so fast he felt blind as he flew under the gateway, and looked to see if Tonino had shut his house for the night.

His heart leaped in him as he saw a light in the place, and the big keys magnified in the shadow till they were fit for the very keys of S. Peter, and in the door the locksmith himself, with bare arms and easy mind, chatting with his neighbour, Dionisio the cobbler.

Signa darted to him.

"Give it me! quick—quick—quick—oh,

please, good Tonino!" he panted. "See—here are the forty francs—all beautiful real gold—and the fair child in the monastery sent it to me to-day. Quick—quick, oh dear Tonino! You never have sold it while we were away?"

"The child pleased an artist to-day, and sat for a picture, and so got the money. Let him have the toy," said Bruno, following, to the astonished Tonino, who had stretched out a hand by sheer instinct to seize the boy, making sure that he had stolen something.

"I have not sold it," he said, with wide open eyes. "But buy it—forty francs!—the like of you, you little bit of a fellow! It cannot be! It cannot be!"

"Oh, dear Tonino!" cried the child, piteously, and he began to tremble all over with dread, his colour went and came hotly and whitely in the yellow gleams of the locksmith's brass lamp; and he could hardly speak plain for excitement, with both his hands clinging to the man's bare arm. "Oh, dear, good Tonino, you never have sold it? oh say you have not sold it? Here is the gold—beautiful real money, and you

never do have gold in Signa, and pray, pray do let me have it quick; I have longed for it so. Oh, you never will know how! Only I said nothing because you all scolded and laughed; and now, perhaps, you have sold it—do say you have not sold it?"

And Signa broke down, crying with a very rain of tears in the reaction from this immeasurable joy to fear.

Bruno's hand fell heavily on the locksmith's shoulder.

"It is good money. You cannot refuse your own price. Let the boy have the fiddle."

"But a baby like that!" stammered Tonino. "And if there are painters about that pay so, there is my little Ginna, rich and rosy as a tomato, and how can you, even in conscience, let that brat squander such a heap of wealth,—the price of a calf almost, and a barrel of wine quite, and the best wine in the commune too; and sure he ought to be made to take it to that good soul Lippo, who has kept him, body and soul together, all these years, when any other man would have let such a little mouse drown in the flood

where he came from; and I do not think I could in conscience let the lad throw all that away, and he a beggar, one may say, unless I speak to Lippo and Nita first, and they be willing, because——"

Bruno's eyes took fire with that sudden light which all the Lastra had dreaded since he had been a stripling, and his hand went inside his shirt, where, about the belt of his breeches, he was always believed to carry a trusty knife, notwithstanding all law and peril.

"Keep your conscience for your neighbours' kettles and pans that you send home with new holes when you solder the old ones!" shouted Bruno. "Out with the fiddle, or as the saints live above us, choked you shall be, and dead as a doornail. Take the gold and fetch me the toy, and learn to preach to me if you dare!"

"But in conscience," stammered the locksmith.

"Give the child the plaything," he cried in a voice of thunder, shaking him as a dog does a chicken, "or it shall be the worse for you. You know *me!*"

"I would take the gold when I could get it, if I were you, Tonino," whispered the cobbler, who was a man of peace. "Gold is a rare sight for sore eyes in Signa, and what is Lippo to you?"

"That is true," murmured the tinman, frightened out of his wits, and thankful for any excuse to yield. "But it is only to-day that I heard that the fiddle is worth quite double. There is a great singer come to stay at one of the villas who saw it—and to let a child have it who will break it—nevertheless, to please a neighbour——"

And having soothed himself a little with this elaborate and useless fiction, as his country folk will, always deriving a very soothing and softening effect from the pleasure of lying, Tonino went grumbling within, and poked about with his dim lamp, and came out slowly with the violin, and clutched the two gold pieces before he would let it go. Signa, who stood trembling with wild excitement, took the precious instrument in both his hands with trembling reverence, the tears falling fast down his cheeks.

"Beast! you have made him cry!" muttered Bruno, and kicked the tinman into his own doorway with a will, and laid his hand on the child's shoulder, and strode up the street of the Lastra, glancing from right to left with mute challenge if any man should have the courage to stop his progress.

No one attempted to call him to account. Tonino was not a popular man, and the weight of Bruno's wrath and the keenness of his knife had been felt by more than one of the eager, chattering audience who leaned out of the windows and crowded each other in the doorways, in breathless hope to see a pretty piece of stabbing.

Bruno went through them in silence. Signa trotted by his side, his hands clasping the violin to his chest, and his great eyes dewy with tears, yet radiant as jewels, in his joy.

Tonino grumbled that if a man made such a sweet morsel of his own bastard he should not be above the owning of it, and went to his bed with sore bones and a grieved heart that he had not asked double for the fiddle; though for

more years than he could remember he had always thought it worthless lumber.

Bruno and Signa went up the street in the moonlight, with yellow flashes now and then falling across them from the lamps swinging in the doorways.

"Where will you play on it, dear little lad," said Bruno, gently, "if you take it home?"

The child looked at him with the smile of a child dreaming beautiful things in its slumber.

"I will keep it at old Teresina's. She will let me, and I will bring it to you when I come. Oh! is it really, really true that I have got it?"

"Quite true; and it is dearer to you already than the old lute, Signa?"

Signa was silent. Bruno had given him the lute.

They passed out of the Lastra and along the road into the street that curves towards the bridge; it was quite dark; but at the little café there which looks towards the river, several men were drinking and playing dominoes on the stones by the feeble light of the brass oil-lamps. Bruno saw Lippo amongst them.

He put his own tall form with the dark cloud of his brown cloak between Lippo and the child, and strode on carelessly without stopping.

"Good night," he called out, "I am taking the boy up with me. I want him to help stack wheat, and he will have to be up at four, so he had best sleep on the hill."

Lippo nodded, and hardly looked up from his dominoes.

They went on over the bridge unquestioned.

The bridge had many groups upon it as on all hot nights; leaning against the parapets, and chatting in the cheerful, garrulous Tuscan fashion. The moon was bright on the wide reaches of the river. The sky was studded with stars.

On a summer night Signa loses her scars of war and age, and is young as when Hercules shook her sunny waters from his sunny locks; resting from labour.

The child looked up at the stars. He wondered if ever in all the world there had been so happy a thing as he. And yet he could only see the stars through his tears; he did not know why the tears came.

An aziola owl went by with its soft cry,

> "Such as nor voice nor lute nor wind nor bird
> The soul ever stirred,
> Unlike and far sweeter than they all."

"Oh, dear Chiù!" said Signa to the owl, calling it by the familiar name that the people give it, "will you tell the little Christ how happy I am, and the old dead bishop too? They may think I am thankless because I cry. Do tell them, Chiù, you go so near the sky!"

"What fancies you have," said Bruno; but the little brown hand was hot as it touched his own. "You are tired and excited," he said more gravely. "You dream too much about odd things. That owl is hunting gnats and mice, and not thinking about the angels."

"I am not tired," said Signa, but he was walking lame, and his voice was weak and trembled.

Bruno, without asking him, lifted him up in his arms; he himself was a strong man, and the light burden of the thin little lad was a small one to him.

"Go to sleep, I will carry you up the hill,"

he said, putting the child's head down against his shoulder. Signa did not resist. He still clasped the violin to him.

Bruno went up the steep road where his mother had carried him through the darkness and cold before she stumbled and fell.

With fever and fatigue Signa dropped asleep, and did not awaken all the way up the long lonely paths through the vines and the reapen fields.

"How he loves that thing already—as never he will love me," thought Bruno, looking down at him in the starlight with that dull sense of hopeless rivalry and alien inferiority which the self-absorption of genius inflicts innocently and unconsciously on the human affections that cling to it, and which later on Love avenges upon it in the same manner.

Bruno, nevertheless, was glad that he had it. Fierce and selfish in all his earlier life, he had taught himself to be gentle and unselfish to Pippa's son. He carried him into the house, still sleeping, and laid him down under the crucifix on a pile of hay, and would have undressed him, but the child murmuring, resisted,

clasping the violin to him, as though in his sleep, afraid that anyone should take it from him.

So Bruno left him as he was upon the hay with his tumbled curls and his violin folded in his crossed arms, in the deep dreamless slumber of a great fatigue, and lit a lanthorn and went round to fodder the cow and see to the ass, and make sure that all had been safe during his absence, and then, with his loaded gun beside him, laid down to rest himself.

He had not been asleep an hour himself, before he was awakened by silvery sweet music that seemed to him to be like the voices of all the nightingales in May singing together; but the nightingales were most of them dumb now —now that the lilies were dead, and the hay garnered.

Bruno started up and listened and looked; he too believed in a dim sort of way in the angels; only he never saw them come down on the slant of the sun-rays as the good men had done that had decorated the churches.

The moon was shining into the house; by the

white cool light he saw that it was the child sitting up in the hay and playing. Signa's eyes were open and lustrous, but they had a look in them as if he were dreaming.

His chin was resting on the violin, his little hands fingered the keys and the bow; his face was very pale; he looked straight before him; he played in his sleep.

Bruno listened aghast; he had a melodious ear himself, the music was never wrong in a chord; it was sweet as all the nightingales in the country singing all together.

He dared not wake the boy, who played on and on in the moonlight.

"It is the gift of God," thought Bruno, awed and sorrowful; because a gift of God put the child farther and farther from him.

He listened, resting on one arm, while the owls cried "Woe!" from the great walnut trees over the house-roof. The sweet melody seemed to fill the place with wonder, and to live in the quivering rays of the moon, and to pass out with them through the lattice amongst the leaves, and so go straight to the stars.

A little while, and it faltered a moment, and then ceased. Signa's head dropped back, his eyes closed, his hands let the violin sink gently down; he slept again as other children sleep.

"It is a gift of God; one cannot go against God," said Bruno, making the sign of the cross on his own broad breast. And he was very sorrowful; and yet proud; and could not bear that it should be so, and yet would not have had it otherwise; as men were in the old days of faith whose sons and daughters went out to martyrdom.

When he got up to his labour before the sun was up, and while the faintest rose-red alone glowed beyond the mountains in the east, he stepped noiselessly not to awaken the boy, and left him sleeping while he went out to his work at the stacking of corn, with the earth dim with shadow and silvered with dew.

He thought of the child and the gifts of God. He did not know that he had seen Pippa's lover.

CHAPTER XII.

"WHERE is the little bit of paper with the name on?" said Bruno, eating his bit of black bread when the morning was up wide and golden over all the harvest land.

Signa lifted up his head from his violin. "I lost it. When I caught the bee, coming home, the paper flew away; the winds took it; does it matter?"

"No. Only it might have been a friend for you. Do you recollect the name?"

Signa shook his curly head.

Recollect anything!—with the violin in his hand, and the music dancing out on the sunbeams, and saying everything for him that he never could say for himself.

What was the name to him? the giver of the gold had only been the ministrant of the little Christ.

Bruno let him alone.

The boy was so happy; sitting in the shade there, trying all cadences that came to him on this new, precious, wondrous thing: he had not the heart to call him to come out in the sun and carry the wheat.

He had been too rough with Pippa. He atoned by being too gentle with this child.

So he went out into the fields again by himself, and built up his stacks, made low because of the hurricanes that come over when there are white squalls upon the sea, and covered till there should be time to thatch them, with snowy linen cloths, so that they look like huge mushrooms growing for the table of Gargantua.

When he had been at work some two or three hours, hearing at intervals, when the wind blew it towards him, the song of the violin that the boy was enjoying within with the cow in her shed, and the sitting hens, and the tethered goat and her kid for listeners, he heard the little feet

that he knew patter over the stubble, and from his half completed stack looked down on Signa's upraised face.

The child had the violin with him.

"Bruno," he asked shyly, "I have been thinking—there is old Nunziata often without bread, and Giudetta, whose children all died of those poison berries, and Stagno the blind man, that has no legs either, and—and so many of them that want so much, and are only hungry and sad—was it selfish of me not to give them the money between them—was it wicked to have the violin? I am sure the angels *meant* the violin, you know; but still did the angels wish me to think of others or all of myself? What do you think? Do you think I was wrong?"

"Anyway it is too late now, bambino," said Bruno, with the curtness of his natural speech. "You have wanted the violin a year, why spoil the pleasure of it?"

"But was it selfish?" persisted Signa.

"Why worry yourself; it is done?"

"But it was, then?" cried the little fellow, with a sort of feverish pain.

Bruno came down the ladder and took up more corn.

"Oh, no; you things that love sounds or sights or bits of wood or oils and earths better than human creatures, always are selfish, so. But I don't know why ever you should be blamed. There is no more selfish beast than a cow with her calf, or a woman with her wean. Why should you not have your fiddle like that; only you will be like Frisco. I knew Frisco—he thought of nothing but saving every scrap of money to buy things to paint with, and he was always after the churches and gateways and places where the colours are; and he said it was a fine gift, and a glorious one. I am not saying it was not; only he went away and left his old mother to be kept by the commune, and people say he is a great man away in Rome; but the old soul is dead and never saw him again. Not that it is for me to say evil of any man."

"But I have no mother," said Signa.

Bruno shrank as though a grass adder had stung him; and stooped and gathered more corn again.

"No, dear," he said, after a moment, very gently, "make a mother of your music if you can. The good God gave it you in her stead. And it is not selfish, dear; you praise heaven in it, and make the children dance with joy, and the old folks forget they are old when they hear you. Do they not say so in the Lastra a thousand times? Do not fret yourself, Signa. The angels sent you the fiddle. Be glad in it. To quarrel with happiness is to quarrel with God. It is but seldom he sends any; perhaps he would send more, only whenever they get it people spoil it by fuming and fretting, as a bad spinner knots the smooth flax. Play to the sick folk and the old and the sorrowful. That will be the way to please the little Christ."

Signa was comforted, and sat down amongst the loose wheat and played all his little fancies away on those strings that were to him as of silver and gold, whilst the cicale buzzed in chorus in the tree-tops, and all the field finches strained their pretty throats in rivalry.

But he did not play gaily as he had done in the house. He was afraid the Gesu was not

content; and why had he no mother as other boys had?

Bruno, working on the top of his golden rick could have bitten his own tongue out for having reminded the child of that.

Signa never asked any questions. They had told him he had come on the wave of the flood, and for himself he thought that the owls had dropped him there. But then it was never of any use to ask an owl. They never said anything to any one, except "Chiù, chiù!" "Woe, woe!"

Bruno sent him away at sunset, with a big basket of beans and cabbages for Nita, to propitiate her into good humour.

It was cheating his lord, because it is understood that what a contadino takes for eating shall be what is needed in his own house; but Bruno did not see harm in it; the men who would not take a crumb out of their master's dwelling for all the temptings of the worst hunger, will never see any sin in taking things off the soil they labour on, and Bruno was no better than his neighbours. Besides, he would have done a wrong thing knowingly, to serve or help the child.

"I should love him little if I would not take a sin on my own soul for his welfare," he said to himself often; that was his idea of how he ought to keep his word to Pippa. He did not argue it out so clearly as that, because peasants do not analyse, but the sense of it moved him always.

So Signa kissed his old lute in farewell, and laid it away on the old marriage box under the crucifix, and sprinkled rose-leaves on it and meadow mint, because he fancied it would like sweet smells, and then shouldered his big skip full of vegetables, and made his way down the hill, hugging the violin close to him.

The waning moon hung silvery and round over the town as he entered. In many of the interiors and in the stone barns the men were thrashing, the flails heaving and falling in pleasant regular cadence, the workers knee-deep in the yellow grain. A few machines hum in Tuscany, but they are very few; they fear to spoil the straw for the plaiters, and they cling still to the old ways, these sons of Ceres Mammosa.

The rush skip on his back was heavy, but his

heart was light as he went. The wonderful wooden thing that he could make sing like a nightingale was all his own for ever.

Only to think what he could do; all that he heard—and he heard so much from the birds and the bees and the winds at dawn, and the owls at night, and the whispering canes and the poplars down by the water, and the bells that swing for prayer—he could tell again on those wonderful strings, of whose power and pathos the child, all untaught, had a true intuition.

With the violin against his shoulder he felt strong enough to face the world and wander over it—ten years old only though he was, and of no more account than a little moth, that a man can kill with the wave of the hand.

The fancy came once to him to go away, with the wooden Rusignuolo, as he called it, and see what people would do to him, and what beautiful things he could hear, going along the roads, and into the strange streets, playing. If only he had not loved the town so well; but every stone of the Lastra was dear to him. They held his feet to the soil.

And, besides, he was only a little child, and the mountains looked too high for him to climb, though those old painters, he knew, must have gone higher still, or how could they have seen the clouds and the little angels and amorini that dwell in the worlds where the rose never fades and the light never ceases?

But neither mountains nor clouds were within his reach, so he only trotted down into the Lastra with his skip of cabbages and beans upon his little tired back, very happy because he had his heart's desire; and if he had been selfish he had asked to be forgiven—none of us can do more.

All people were still astir in the place; by eight of the clock it is nearly dark under these hills when once the day of SS. Peter and Paul is past; they were sitting about in the street, the doorways showed the golden straw that the girls were still sorting; there was the smell of the fields everywhere; oxen in red waggons crept through the twilight taking grain to the thrashing barns; men came in from the river-side with their nets wet and their bare legs shining with sand, and their pumpkin gourds full of little fish; here

and there was a brown monk with his huge straw hat on his shoulders and his rosary dangling in front of his knees.

He nodded up at old Teresina; eighty years old and spinning at a high window under the gateway; she would let him go and play his violin there in her little dusky den, among the ropes of onions and the strings of drying tomatoes, and with the one little square lattice looking out to the bold mountain of the high Albano range that rises above Artimino and Carmignano, and takes all the rose of the dawn, and all the purples of the storm, and wears them as its own, and has the sun go down behind it and the star of love rise from it.

Then he ran up the little dark stairs into the room where she lived; a bright old soul with many daughters and sons and grandchildren scattered over the place; a good spinner and good plaiter still, though nigh eighty years old; she had spent all her years here under the western gate, seeing the harvest waggons and the grape barrels come and go for nearly three-fourths of a century; she could remember the

French fellows with Murat riding through; she had sat at her window and watched them; she had just married then; she had seen the sun sink down over the mountains calm and golden, or red and threatening, every night of her life; and had never slept elsewhere than here, where the warders had lighted their beacons and pointed their matchlocks in the old days long before her, when news came that the Pisans were marching from the sea; the Lastra was her world, but it had been wide enough to make her shrewd and keen of sight, and happy enough to keep her kindly of temper and of quick sympathy with youth and childhood.

Of the child Signa she was very fond; she liked to be woke in the dark mornings by his fresh voice carolling some field song of the people as he went out under the gateway to his work. And she was one of the few folks who liked Bruno better than his gentler brother.

"I have seen them both with their bullocks when they were lads," she would say to her neighbours. "Bruno made his do a hard day's work, but he fed them well and never galled them, and

the beasts loved him. Lippo would hang his with tassels and flowers, and pat them if people were looking! but he would prick them twenty times an hour and steal their fodder and sell it for a penny and play morra. Do not talk to me! the fierce one for my money!"

So when Signa ran in to her and told her the story of the violin, not very coherently, mingling the tinman and the little Christ and the gold pieces and the marble bishop all together in an inextricable entanglement, Teresina was sympathetic and held up her hands, and believed in the angels and wondered at the beautiful gift with all the ardour that he could have desired, and said of course, to be sure he might keep it there; why not? and play it there too, she hoped, and opened for its safer concealment the heavy lid of a great chest she had in her chamber; one of those sarcophagus-like coffers, which the Middle Ages made in such numbers and ornamented with such lavish care; this one was of oak wood, very old; and a hungry connoissieur had told her that it was of the workmanship of Dello and had offered her any money for it; but she had told him that

Dello, whoever he was, was nothing to her, and that the chest had held her bridal linen and now held her cere-clothes all ready, and all of her own spinning, and would hold her granddaughters' and great granddaughters' after her, she hoped.

So the chest, whether of Dello or not, remained in its corner, and she opened it and let Signa lay his Rusignuolo in it on her bridal sheets, and her shroud, that she had finished last winter and was very proud of, and helped him cover it with the dead rose leaves and the sprigs of lavender, which she had put there to keep moth away, and the bough of cypress which she had laid there to bring good luck.

So Signa, quite sure that all was safe, went away quite happy and shouldered his kreel again, and went towards Lippo's house.

Signa turned up by the old shrine that has the grey wood door and the soft pink colour and the frescoed seraphs by the high south gate, and mounted the paved steep lane to Lippo's house.

There was a little gossipping crowd before it; old Baldo with his horn spectacles shoved up on his forehead, and Momo the barber, who had a tongue

for twenty, and Caccarello, the coppersmith, and several women, foremost of whom was Nita screaming at the top of her voice, with both hands in air in gesticulation, and Toto beating the drum tattoo with a metal spoon on a big frying-pan as a sort of chorus to his mother's cries.

Whilst still he toiled up the lane concealed from their view by his burden of cabbages, he caught her flying sentences, scattered like dry peas rolling out of a basket.

"Two hundred francs in gold! given him, all for his peaking little face, and thrown away—thrown away—thrown away on a wretched creaking thing that Tonino kept amongst his nails and his keys! and never a centime brought to us! to people that took him out of the water like a half-drowned pup and have spent our substance on him ever since as if he were our own. Oh, the little viper!—fed at my breast as he was and laid in the cradle with my own precious boy! Two hundred francs all in gold—all in gold! and the horrid little wretch squanders it on a toy with a hole in it for the wind to come out of, squeaking like a mouse in a trap. But there

must be law on it—there must be law! that brute Tonino could not claim a right to take such swarms of money from a pauper brat!"

"Nay," said the barber. "Tonino tells us he swore his conscience was hair on end at such a thing. But when a man has a knife at his throat—"

"I saw the steel touch him, so he shivered," swore Caccarello, the coppersmith.

"And the fiddle was worth a thousand francs. It was a rare Cremona," whined the barber. "It is poor Tonino that is cheated—near as bad as you, dear neighbour!"

"But the money was not the little brat's, it belonged to those who nourished and housed him," said a fat housewife, who often gossipped with Baldo over a nice little mess of oil and onions.

"That, of course," said Caccarello. "But Lippo is so meek and mild. He has cockered up that flyblow as if it were a prince's lawfully-begotten son and heir."

"Lippo is a heaven-accursed fool," said old Baldo, with a blow of his staff—he was never

weary of telling his opinion of his son-in-law—"but he is not to blame here. He never could have fancied that a little beast would come home with the price of a prime bullock and go and waste it on a fiddle without a thought of by your leave or for your leave, or any remembrance of all he owed in common gratitude for bed and bread. The child could be put in prison, and so he ought to be; what is a foundling's gain belongs to those that feed him. That is fair law everywhere. If Lippo were not daft he would hand the boy over to the law and let it deal with him."

"Bravo!" said the little crowd, in chorus; for Baldo was a well-to-do old man and much respected, wearing a silk hat and velvet waistcoat upon feast-days.

"Ay, truly," said Nita, stretching her brawny brown arms in all the relish of anticipated vengeance, while Toto beat louder on his frying-pan, and called in glee:

"And you will shave his head now mother? and give me that gilt ball of his to sell? and when his back is raw as raw, you will let me rub the salt in it?"

Nita kissed his shaven crown, forgetful of the character for goodness that she had been at such pains to build up before her townsfolk; but Lippo, mindful of his fair repute, reproved him.

"Only a little wholesome chastisement: that is all we ever allow; you know that, my son."

And Toto grinned. He knew his father's tricks of speech.

The neighbours thought nothing of it; take a brat off the face of the flood and bring it up out of charity, and then see it squander the first money that it touched upon a fiddle, without so much as bringing home a farthing! They were unanimously of opinion that it would have provoked a saint into exchanging her palm-sheaf for a rod of iron.

A fiddle too, that Tonino swore was worth a thousand francs, if one, and a purest old Cremona; as if an oat pipe cut in the fields were not good enough for this little cur picked out of the muddy water! And then they all of them had children too; pretty children, or, at least, children they all thought pretty, and

where was ever a painter found to give them money for their faces?

Money was scarce in the Lastra, and popular feeling ran strong and high against Signa for having ventured to have a piece of good fortune fall upon him. If he had brought it home now and put it in Lippo's strong box and Lippo had given them all a supper with it, and played a quarter of it away in morra or draughts, as no doubt he would have done, then, indeed, they might have pardoned it. But a fiddle! and not a single centime for themselves!

"Punish him I will," murmured Lippo, goaded to desperation, but thinking woefully of what his brother would say, or, worse still, do, on his own skin and bones. "Still, he is such a little thing, and saved by me, as one may say—not that I take merit. It is a horrible thing—all that good gold squandered on a fiddle, and we robbing our precious children nine long years to feed a bastard deserted by those that had the right; and yet, dear friends, a child no older than my Toto——"

"Maudlin ass," quoth Baldo in high wrath,

while the barber said that Lippo was too great a saint to live, and the others answered that such goodness was beautiful, but Lippo must look at home; and all the while Nita screamed on to the night air, bewailing.

Signa heard, as he laboured up the hill beneath his load of cabbages, the angry voices rolling down the slope and drifting to the Madonna sitting with the glory round her head behind her little wooden wicket.

The poor Madonna often heard such words. When they had spoken them worst they gave her flowers.

Signa heard. What had he done? That they had power to put him in prison he never doubted. They had power to beat him—why not to do anything else?

His limbs shook and his heart sank within him. Yet one great thought of comfort was with him—the fiddle was safe under its rose-leaves and its lilac mint-flowers. Teresina would not let it go.

He understood that the story of his buying the violin had run through the Lastra, gathering

exaggerated wonders as it went. Indeed, if only he had thought a little, he would have known that the scene at the tinman's shop by the archway never could pass without being talked about by the dozen idle folks who had had nothing to do but to watch it.

But even Bruno had not thought of that. Italians love secrets; but they bury them as the ostrich buries her head.

Toiling up under his overshadowing cabbages, and in the dusk of the evening, they did not see him. The loud shrill voices thrilled to his very bones.

"Let me get at him!" thundered old Baldo, who echoed his daughter always. "Two hundred francs! The little brute! And he owes me that for lodgement! Oh, Nita mine! now see what comes of taking nameless mongrels——"

"Two hundred francs!" moaned Lippo, his voice shaking with a sort of religious horror, "When he might have brought half to my wife, who has been an angel of mercy to him, and spent the other half in masses for his poor dead mother's soul, which all the devils are burning now!"

"That is the thought of a good man, but of an ass!" said Baldo bluntly. "They should have come to your strong box and mine, son; and as many francs as there were shall he have lashes!"

"Let me get at him!—let me get at him! Oh, the little snake that I suckled at my breast, robbing my own precious child for him! Two hundred francs! two hundred francs! A year's rent! A flock of sheep!—wine to flood the town!—waggons of flour!—ten years' indulgence! —half this world and all the next, why one might buy for such a sum as that! And flung away upon a fiddle-case! But to prison the child shall go, and Tonino must disgorge. Let me only catch him! Let him only come home!"

Signa, in the dark upon the stones, looking up, saw this excited crowd, with waving hands, and fists thrust into each other's eyes, and faces glowing in the light of the gateway lamp, and voices breaking out against him and blaming Bruno.

They were ready to fling him bodily into the Arno.

He was shy, but he was brave. His heart sickened and his temples throbbed with horror of the unknown things that they would wreak upon him. But he lowered the load off his shoulders, and darted up the paved way into their midst.

"It is all untrue," he panted to them. "It was only forty francs, and Bruno had nothing to do with it, and the little Gesu of Perugino sent me the money for my own, and selfish it might be, I know; but that I have asked God; and beat me you may till I am dead, or put me in prison, as you say, but it was all my own, and my wooden Rusignuolo is safe, and you cannot touch it, and——"

A stroke of Nita's fist sent him down upon the ground.

He was light and agile. He was on his feet in a second. All the wrongs and sufferings of his childhood blazed up like fire in him. He was a gentle little soul, and forgiving; but for once the blood burned within him into a furious pain.

Stung and bruised and heated and blinded by the blows that the woman rained on him, he

sprang on her, struck her in the eyes with all his force, and tearing himself out of the score of hands that clutched at him, he slipped through his tormentors and fled down the slope.

"I will tell Bruno! I will tell Bruno!" he sobbed as he went; and while the women surrounded the screaming Nita, who shrieked that the little brute had blinded her for life. A solemn silence fell upon the men, who looked at Lippo. If Bruno were told, life would not pass smoothly at the Lastra.

That minute of their hesitation gave the child time for his liberty. When Lippo and the barber pursued him, he was out of sight, running fast under the shadow of the outer walls, where all was silent in the dusk.

"This comes of doing good!" groaned Lippo to the barber.

CHAPTER XIII.

SIGNA ran on under the walls where the men make ropes on the grass, but where it was all deserted now.

He had never known what passion was before. He had borne all ill-usage as his due. He had let himself be kicked and cuffed as a gentle little spaniel does, only looking up with wistful eyes of sorrowful wonder.

But now the fury of a sudden sense of unbearable wrong had boiled up in his veins and mastered him, and was hissing still in his ears and beating still in his brain.

A sense of having done some great crime was heavy on him. He knew he had been very wicked. He could feel himself striking, striking, striking, and the woman's eyeballs under

his hands. He might have killed her for anything he knew. To his vivid little fancy and his great ignorance it seemed quite possible. And yet he had borne everything so long, and never said a word, and lain awake so many nights from pain of bruises.

Could anybody be very angry with him for having lost his temper just this once?

Bruno would not—that he knew.

He heard the steps of Lippo and the barber and the mutterings of their voices pursuing him. He ran as if he had had wings. A great vague terror of hideous punishment lent him the speed of a gazehound. He doubled the walls at headlong speed, his bare feet scarcely touching the ground, and darted in at the door of old Teresina's dwelling in the western gateway. By heaven's mercy she had not drawn the bolt.

The old woman was in her short kirtle, with the handkerchief off her grey knot of hair, getting ready for going to bed, with one little lamp burning under a paper picture of the Nativity.

Signa ran to her, tumbling over the spinning-

wheel and the dozing cat and the huge brown moon-like loaf of bread.

"Oh, dear Teresina! let me hide here!" he cried in his terror, clinging to her skirts. "Lippo is after me. They are so angry about the violin, and I have hurt Nita very much because she knocked me down. Hide me—hide me quick, or they will kill me or give me to the guards!"

Old Teresina needed no twice telling. She opened the big black coffer with the illuminated figures, where she had hidden the violin inside, and motioned the child to follow it. The coffer would have sheltered a man.

She left the lid a little ajar, and Signa laid himself down at the bottom with the old-world smell of incense and spiced woods. His wooden Rusignuolo was safe; he kissed it, and clasped it to him. After all, what did anything matter, if only they would leave that to him in peace?

"Lie still till they have been here to ask for you," said Teresina; and she tied her handkerchief over her head again and began to spin.

In a few minutes there was rapping on her door.

Teresina put her head out of the window, and called to know who was there.

"It is I—Lippo," a voice called up to her in answer. "Is the little devil with you? We have loved him as our own, and now he has half murdered Nita—Nita that fed him from her bosom and treated him inch for inch like Toto all these years! Here is Papucci—he will tell you. Is the boy with you?"

"I have not seen him all day," said Teresina. "I thought he was on the hills. Come up, good Lippo, and look, and tell me more. The child has a sweet pipe, but heaven only knows where the devil may not lurk. Come up, Lippo, and tell me all. You make me tremble."

"You work late, mother," said Lippo, suspiciously, tumbling up the stairs into the chamber.

"Aye. Lisa's bridal is on S. Anne's day, and there is next to no sheeting. A granddame must do what she can for the dower. But tell me all—all—quick, dear! How white you look, the saints keep us!"

"White! With a little viper nurtured nine years stinging you, and a dear, good wife blind,

I daresay, for life, who would not be white?" wept Lippo, glancing sharply through the shadows of the room. "And of course you must have heard—two hundred francs and a beastly fiddle! and it is enough to bring the judgment of Holy Church——"

"I have heard nothing," said Teresina, with her hands uplifted in amaze. "Sit down and tell me, Lippo and Papucci too; you look ready to drop, both of you. Two hundred francs! Gesu! why, it would buy up the whole of the town! And a fiddle—ah, now I think of it, the dear naughty little lad was always sighing for an old thing in Tonino's window that he had played on once."

"If I could find him or it I would break it in shivers over his head," said Lippo, forgetting his saintly savour. "I am a meek man, as you know, and a merciful, and never say a harsh word to a dog; but my dear wife blind, and all that money squandered, and Bruno, if that little beast is gone to him, ready to smash every bone in my body! It is horrible!"

"Horrible, truly," gasped Teresina. "It is

like a green apple to set one's teeth on edge. But tell me the tale clear; how is one to understand?"

They told her the tale, both in the same breath, with every ornament that imagination and indignation could lavish on it: death may be imminent, time may be money, a moment lost may mean ruin or murder or a house devoured by flames; but, all the same, Lippo and all his country-people will stop to tell their tale. Let Death's scythe fall or Time's sands run out, they must stand still and tell their tale.

The story-tellers of the Decamerone are true to nationality and nature.

And while they told it Teresina trimmed fresh her lucernata, and made the wick burn so brightly that there was not a nook or cranny of the little place in which a mouse could have been hidden unseen.

"But you never will go after him to Bruno's," she said, when the narrative was done, and all her horror poured out at it in strongest sympathy. "The child is half-way there by this time, and Bruno takes part with him right or

wrong—you best know why—and he is so violent; and at night, too, on that lonely hill; there might be mischief."

"Aye, there might," said Papucci, with a quaking in his voice: she knew her men.

"No fear of that," said Lippo, with a boast; "Bruno is fierce, we all know his fault—dear fellow, the saints change his heart! But with me—oh, never with me."

"For all that he shook you once many years ago when you beat the child all in justice and good-meaning—shook you as a big dog does a little one," said Teresina, with a nod of her head and a twinkle in her eyes. "I would not go nigh him, not to-night; you must think of your good Nita and all those children. With the morning you will be cool, both of you. But Bruno on that hill, in the dark—I should not care to face him, not on ill terms. You have your family, Lippo."

"But if we leave it till the morning——"

"Well, what harm can come? The child's sin is the same, and Nita can have law on him; and, about the money, Bruno, of course, must hear

reason, and give up the fiddle, and let you get the whole sum back. Tonino would see the justice of that: you have reared and roofed the child; all his is yours—that is fair right. But if you cross Bruno, of a sudden, in the night ——"

"There is reason in what you say, mother," assented Lippo, whose heart was hammering against his ribs in mortal terror of confronting Bruno.

And after a little while he went, glad of an excuse to veil his fears from the loquacious barber.

"Tell Nita I shall see her in the morning, and how sorry I am, because I loved the lad's little pipe, and never thought he had such evil in him," said Teresina, opening her door to call the valediction after them down the stairway. Then she came and opened the lid of the coffer.

"He is gone now—jump out, little one."

"Oh, why did you keep him?" cried Signa, looking up as if he were in his coffin. "I thought he never would go, and I was so afraid. And have I hurt her so much as that, do you think?"

"As if your little fists could bruise a big cow like Nita—what folly! I kept him to send him away more surely. When you want to get rid of a man, press him to stay; and if you have anything you need to hide, light two candles instead of one. No, you have never hurt Nita. Take my word, she is eating an onion supper this minute. But there will be trouble when Bruno knows, that I do fear."

Signa sat up in the coffer, holding the violin to his chest with two hands.

"Am I a trouble to Bruno?" he said thoughtfully.

"Well, I should think so—I am not sure. The brothers are always quarrelling about you. There is something underneath. You have never complained to Bruno?"

"No. Georgio told me Bruno might kill Lippo if I did, and then they would hurt Bruno—send him to the galleys all his life; so Georgio said."

"Like enough," muttered Teresina. "But you cannot hide this, little one. All the Lastra will talk about it."

"And there will be harm for Bruno?"

"He will be violent, I daresay—he always is. Bruno does not understand soft answers, and Lippo is all in the wrong; and then, of course, Bruno must learn at last how they have treated you. It will be a *pasticcio.*"

Teresina sat down on her wooden chair, and twitched the kerchief off her head, again perplexed and sorrowful; to make a *pasticcio*—a bad pasty—is the acme of woe and trouble to her nation.

"Can I do anything?" said Signa wistfully, sitting still in the open coffer.

"No—not that I see—unless you could put yourself out of the world," said the old woman, not meaning anything in particular, but only the utter hopelessness of the matter in her eyes.

Signa looked up in silence; he did not miss a word.

"No, there is nothing to be done," said Teresina, in anxious meditation. "Bruno will get into trouble about you—I have always thought he would. But that is not your fault, poor little soul! There is something——. Lippo is a fox.

He plays his cards well, but what his game has been nobody knows. Perhaps he has made a mistake now. Bruno must know they have ill-used you. That comes of this money. Money is god and devil. Why could that painter go and give you gold?—a bit of a thing like you. Any other man than Bruno would have put it by to buy you your coat for your first communion. But that was always Bruno—one hand on his knife and the other scattering gifts. For my part, I think Bruno the better man of the two, but no one else does. Yes; there must be trouble. Bruno will break his brother's head, and Lippo will have law on him. You might go to Tonino and get him to take the fiddle back; but then it was only forty francs, and Lippo will always scream for the two hundred that the fools have chattered about; that would be no good. Oh, Dio mio! if only that angel at the Certosa had not sent you anything. Angels stand aloof so many years, and then they put their finger in the dough and spoil the baking. May they forgive me up above! I am an ignorant old woman, but if they would only answer prayer a little

quicker or else not at all. I speak with all respect. My child, sleep here to-night, and be off at dawn to Bruno. Sleep on it. Get up while it is grey, to have the start of Lippo and his people. But sleep here. There is a bit of grass matting that will serve you—there, where the cat is gone. And I will get you a drop to drink and a bit of bread, for tired you must be and shaken; and what the Lastra see in Lippo to make a saint of baffles me; a white-livered coward and a self-seeker. He will die rich; see if he do not die rich! he will have a podere, and keep his baroccino, I will warrant, before all is done!"

She brought the child the little glass of red wine and a big crust; he drank the wine—he could not eat—and laid down as she told him by the cat upon the matting. He was so unhappy for Bruno; the Rusignuolo scarcely comforted him, only every now and then he would stretch out his hand and touch it, and make sure that it was there; and so fell asleep, as children will, be they ever so sorrowful.

He woke while it was still dark, from long habit, but the old woman was already astir. She

made him take a roll and a slice of melon, as she opened her wooden shutter and looked out on to the little acacia trees below, and the big mountain, that was as yet grey and dark.

"Get you up the hill, dear, to Bruno, and out of the house before the men are about underneath with the straw," she said to him, "and I do not know what you can say; and I misdoubt there will be ill words and bad blows; and it has been said for many a year that Bruno would end his days at the galleys. I remember his striking his sister once at the wine fair in Prato—such a scene as there was—and the blood spoiled her bran new yellow bodice, that was fit for the Blessed Mary—speaking with all respect. There is Gian undoing his big doors below—every place is full of grain now. Run, run, dear little fellow, and the saints be with you, and do not forget that they love a peacemaker; though, for the matter of that, we folks are not like them—we love a feud and a fight, and we will prick our best friend with a pin rather than have dull times and no quarrel. Run off quick, and take the melon with you."

He did as she told him, and ran away. She watched him from the little square window over the carnation pots. She was a good old soul, but she could not help a thrill of longing to see how Bruno would come down into the Lastra like a brown bull gored and furious.

"Only the one that is in the right always gets the worst of it," thought Teresina (who had seen her seventy years of life), as the last star died out of the skies, and she turned from the lattice to scrub out her pipkins and pans, and fill her copper pitcher with water, and sweep the ants away with her reed besom, and then sat down to spin on at Lisa's bridal sheeting, glancing now and then at the mountain, and wondering what would happen.

What would happen?

That was what tortured the little beating heart of Signa, as he ran out into the lovely cold darkness of the dawn, as the chimes of the clocks told four in the morning. He held his slice of melon and bread in one hand, and clasped the violin and its bow close to him with the other. A

terrible sense of guilt, of uselessness, of injury to others, weighed on him.

Even Teresina, who was fond of him, had confessed that he was a burden to Bruno, and a cause for strife at all times, and no better. Even Teresina, who was so good to him, had said that he could do nothing unless he could get himself out of the world.

The words pursued him with a sense that the old woman would have bitten her tongue through rather than have conveyed into the child's mind —a sense of being wanted by no one, useful to no one, undesirable and wearisome, and altogether out of place in creation.

He was old enough to feel it sharply, and not old enough to measure it rightly. Besides Nita and Toto and Georgio, and all of them, had told him the same thing ten thousand times: what was said so often by so many must be true.

To kill himself never entered his thoughts. The absolute despair which makes life loathsome cannot touch a child. But he did think of running away, hiding, effacing himself, as a little hare tries to do when the hounds are after it.

He would go away, he thought; it was his duty; it was the only thing he could do to serve Bruno, and he was ashamed of himself, and so sorrowful; and perhaps people might be kind to him on the other side of the mountains where the sun came from; perhaps they might when they heard the Rusignuolo. Other boys decide to run away for love of adventure or weariness of discipline, but he resolved to run away because he was a burden and brought wild words between two brothers, and was good for nothing else.

The curse of granted prayers lay heavy on his young frightened soul. The thing he had desired was with him; the thing that he had thought was sweeter than food or friends or home, or anything; and yet his feet were weary and his heart was sick from the woe which it had brought upon him.

"Still it is mine—really mine!" he thought, with a thrill of happiness which nothing could wholly stifle in him, as his hand wandered over the strings as he went, and drew out from them soft sighing murmurs like the pipe of waking birds.

Meanwhile he was quite resolute to run away; down into Florence, he thought, and then over to where the sunrise was. Of the west he was afraid; the sea was there, of which he had heard terrible things in the winter evenings, and the west always devoured the sun, and he supposed it was always night there.

"I will just bid Gemma good-bye—just once," he thought, running on, stumbling, and not seeing his way, because his eyes were so brimming with tears; but sight did not matter much. He could find his way about quite safely in the darkest night.

The gates of the great gardens were open, for the labourers were already at work there, and he ran into the shadowy, fresh, dew-wet place, looking for her.

If he could find her without going to the cottage, he thought, it would be best, because her father might have heard and might detain him, thinking to please Bruno.

He was not long before he saw her. Out of bed at daybreak, as birds are out of their nests, lying on her back in the wet grass by the marble

pond, where the red Egyptian rushes were in flower, and munching the last atom of a hard black crust which had been given her for her breakfast, while the big water lilies still were shut up, and the toads were hobbling home to their dwellings in the bottom of the tanks.

Gemma was one of those beautiful children, who, in the hand of Raffaelle, are not a fable. As they grow older, they will lose their beauty almost always; but the few people who ever had time to look at Gemma, thought that she would never lose hers.

No doubt there was some strains of the old Goth or of the German blood in her from the far times when Totila had tramped with his warriors over the ravaged valleys, or Otho had come down like a hawk into the plains. She was brilliantly fair; as she lay now on the grass on her back, with her knees drawn up and her rosy toes curled, and her arms above her head, she shone in the sun like a pearl, and her face might have come out of Botticelli's choir, with its little scarlet mouth and its wonderful bloom and its mass of lightest

golden hair cut short to the throat, but falling over the eyes.

"Gemma, I have brought you some more breakfast," he said to the pretty little child.

She threw her arms round his neck, and set her pearly teeth into the melon. The bread followed. When she had done both she touched his cheek with her finger.

"Why are you crying?"

"Because I am no use to anyone. Because I bring trouble on everybody."

Gemma surveyed him with calm, serious eyes.

"You bring me good things to eat."

That was his use; in her eyes there could be no better.

The tears fell down Signa's face; he sobbed under his breath, and kissed Gemma's light curling locks with a sorrow and force in his lips that she did not understand.

"I think I will go away, Gemma," he said, with a sort of desperate resolve.

Gemma, who was not easily excited, surveyed him with her blue eyes seriously as before.

"Where?"

"I do not know."

"That is silly."

Gemma was a year younger than he. But she was not vague as he was, nor did she ever dream.

"I will go away, I and the Rusignuolo," said Signa, with a sob in his throat. "It is the only way to be no burden—to make peace."

Gemma pushed a lizard with her little rosy toes.

"Mimi does not bring me so much fruit as you do," she said thoughtfully. Mimi was a neighbour's son, who was nine years old, and worshipped her, and brought her such green plums and unripe apples as his father's few rickety trees would yield, by windfalls. She was wondering how it would be with her if she were left to Mimi only.

"Perhaps I will get you beautiful golden fruit where I go," said Signa, who always unconsciously fell into figures and tropes. "The signore in the monastery said my mouth would drop pearls. I have seen pearls—beautiful white beads that the ladies wear. They are on the goldsmiths' bridge in the city. When my lips make

them you shall have them round your curls, Gemma, and on your throat, and on your arms; how pretty you will be!"

He was smiling through his tears, and kissing her. Gemma listened.

"With a gold cross like Bice's?" she said, breathlessly. Bice was a rich contadina who had such a necklace, a string of pearls with a gold cross, which she wore on very high feasts and sacred anniversaries.

"Just like Bice's," said Signa, thinking of his own woe and answering to please her.

Gemma reflected: pushing her little foot against the wet gravel in lines and circles.

"Run away, at once!" said she suddenly, with a little shout that sent the lizards scampering.

"Oh, Gemma!" Signa felt a sting, as if a wasp had pierced him. Gemma loved him no more than this.

"Run away, directly!" said the little child, with a stamp of her foot, like a baby empress.

"To get you the pearls?"

Gemma nodded.

Signa sat still thinking; his tears fell; his eyes watched a blue and grey butterfly in the white bells of the aloe flower. He could not be utterly unhappy, because he had the violin. If it had not been for that—

"Why do you not go?" said the little child fretfully, with the early sunbeams all about her little yellow head in a nimbus of light.

Signa got up; he was very pale; his great brown eyes swam in a mist of tears.

"Well—I will go—I have got the Rusignuolo. Perhaps it is not true what the signore said—but I will go and see. If I can get pearls—or anything that is good—then I will come back, and the Lastra will be glad of me, and I will give everything to the Lastra, and to Bruno and you. Only, to go away—it will kill me, I think. But if I do die, I shall be no burden anymore then on anyone. And if the signore spoke truth, and I am worth anything, then I will be great. When I am a man I will come back and live here always, because no place can be ever so beautiful; and I will make new gates, all of beaten gold; and I will build the walls up

where they are broken; and I will give corn and wine in plenty everywhere, and there shall be beautiful singing all the night and day, and music in all the people's homes, and we will go out through the fields every morning praising God; and then Signa will not be old or forgotten any more, but all the world will hear of her—"

And he went, not looking back once at the rushes and the water-lily and the little child; seeing only his own visions, and believing them;—as children and poets will.

But Gemma, pausing a moment, ran after him.

"Take me, too!"

"Take you—away?"

"Yes. I want to go too."

Signa kissed her with delight.

"You are so fond of me—as that?"

"Oh, yes; and I am so tired of black bread, and Mimi's plums are always green."

Signa put her away a little sadly.

"You must not come. There is your father."

"Yes. I will come. I want to see what you will see."

"But, if you should be unhappy?"

"I will come back again."

Signa wavered. He longed for his playmate. But he knew that she wished a wrong thing.

"I cannot take you," he said, with a sigh. "It would be wicked. Palma would cry all the day long. Besides, I am nothing—nobody wants me. I go to spare Bruno pain and trouble; that is different. But you, Gemma, all of them love you."

"Let us go," said Gemma, putting her hand in his.

"But I dare not take you!"

"You do not take me," said Gemma, with a roguish smile, and the sophism of a woman grown. "You do not take me. I go."

"But why? Because you love me?"

Gemma ruffled her golden locks.

"Because they give me nothing to eat."

"They give you as much as they have themselves."

"Ah! but you will give me more than you have," said Gemma, with the external foolishness and internal logic of female speech.

Signa put her away with a sigh.

"Perhaps I shall have nothing, Gemma. Do not come."

Gemma stopped to think.

"You will always get something for *me*," she said, at last. "Take me—or I will go and tell Bruno."

Signa hesitated, and succumbed to the stronger will and the resolute selfishness of the little child: they are more often feminine advantages than the world allows.

"You will be angry with me, Gemma, in a day, if I let you have your way," he said, hanging his head in sad perplexity.

Gemma laughed: she was so pretty when she laughed; Fra Angelico would have delighted to paint her so.

"When I am angry, I am not dull," she said, with much foresight for her own diversion. "The boys slap me back again. But you never do. Let us go—or I will run up and tell Bruno."

"Come, then," said Signa, with a sigh; he knew that she would do what she said. Gemma,

nine years old, was already a woman in many ways, and had already found out that a determination to please herself and to heed no one else's pleasure was the only royal road to comfort in earthly life.

And she was resolved to go; already she had settled with herself what she would make Signa do, shaping out her projects clearly in the sturdy little brain that lived under her amber curls.

She was thought a beautiful child, but stupid; people were wrong.

Gemma lying doing nothing under a laurel bush, with her angelic little face, and her stubborn refusal to learn to read, or learn to plait, or learn to spin, or learn to do anything, was as shrewd as a little fox cub for her own enjoyments and appetites. She lay in the sun, and Palma did the work.

"We will go to Prato," said Gemna, all smiles now that her point was gained.

"I thought—Florence," said Signa, who, in his own thoughts, had resolved to go there.

"Chè!" said Gemna, with calm scorn. "Boys

never think. You would meet Bruno on the road. It is Friday."

Friday is the market day, when all fattori and contadini having any green stuff to sell, or grain to chaffer for, or accounts to settle with, meet in the scorch of the sun, or in the teeth of the north wind, in face of Orcagna's Loggia; a weather-worn, stalwart, breezy, loquacious crowd, with eyes that smile like sunny waters, and rough cloaks tossed over one shoulder, and keen lips at close bargains either with foe or friend.

"And there is a fair at Prato," said Gemma, "I heard them saying so at the millhouse—when I took Babbo's grain."

"But what have we to do with a fair?" said Signa, whose heart was half broken.

Gemma smiled till her little red pomegranate bud of a mouth showed all her teeth, but she did not answer him. She knew what they would have to do with it. But he—he was dreaming of gates of inlaid gold for the Lastra.

What was the use of talking any sense to him? He was so foolish: so Gemma thought.

"Prato goes out—to the world," she said, not

knowing very well what she meant, but feeling that an indefiniteness of speech was best suited to this dreamer with whom she had to do. "And if you want to get away you must go there at once—or you will have Bruno or Lippo coming on you, and then there will be murder; so you say. Come. Let us run across the bridge while we can. There is nobody here. Come—run."

"Come, then," said Signa, under his breath, for it frightened him. But Gemma was not frightened at all.

It was now five.

The great western mountain had caught the radiance of the morning shining on it from the opposite mountains, and was many-coloured as an opal; the moon was blazing like a globe of phosphorus, while the east was warm still with rosy light; all above them, hills and fields and woods and river and town, were bathed in that full clear light, that coldness of deep dew, that freshness of stirring wind, that make the earth as young at every summer sunrise in the south, as though Eos and Dionysius were not dead with all the fancies and the faiths of men,

and in their stead Strauss and Hegel reigning, twin godhead of the dreary day.

She took his hand and ran with him.

Signa's tears fell fast and his face was very pale; he kept looking back over his shoulder at each yard; but the little child laughed as she ran at topmost speed on her little bare toes, dragging him after her down the piece of road to the bridge, and across the bridge, and so on to the hillside.

"I know Prato is the other way of the mountains," said Gemma, who had more practical shrewdness in her little rosy finger than Signa in all his mind and body. "I have seen the people go to the markets and fairs, and they always go up here—up, up,—and then over."

Signa hardly heard. He ran with her because she had tight hold of his hand; but he was looking back at the gates of the Lastra.

No one said anything to them. On the north side of the bridge no one had heard the terrible story; and if they had heard, would not have had leisure to say anything, because it was threshing time, and everybody was busy in one way or

another with the corn—piling it on the waggons, driving the oxen out to the fields for it, tossing it into the barns or the courtyards, banging the flails over it, or stacking the straw in ricks, with a long pole riven through each to stay the force of the hurricanes.

When the country side is all yellow with reaped grain, or all purple with gathered grapes, Signa people would not have time to notice an emperor; their hearts and souls are in their threshing barns and wine-presses. When they are quiet again, and have nothing to do but to plait or to loiter, then they will make a mammoth out of a midge in the way of talk, as well as any gossippers going.

CHAPTER XIV.

THERE were many mules, and horses, and carts, and men, and women, and asses rattling out over the cross roads from the many various villages and farms towards Prato.

In the ways of the Lastra itself dust was rising as the noisy ramshackle baroccini were pulled out of their stables and got ready with any poor beast that was at home. The cattle had all been driven over in strings the night before from every part of the country, lowing, whinnying, and bleating as they went.

The road over the hill was thick with dust, and trampled with traffic as the children climbed it, and many a rope-harnessed horse and crazy

vehicle flew by them in a cloud of white powder, the driver shrieking, "Via, via, via!"

"We shall be seen and stopped," said Signa, shrinking back; but Gemma pulled him onward.

"Nonsense," she said, steadily. "They do not think about us; they think about themselves and the fair; and where they will drink and eat, and how they will cheat."

Gemma dwelt under the lemon leaves of lonely Giavola; but her experiences of life had been sufficient to tell her, that when your neighbour is eating well and cheating comfortably he will usually let you alone.

She would not let him go back; she kept close hold of his hand, and trotted on her rosy, strong little feet that tired no more than do a mountain pony's.

She was right in her conclusions. The carts rattled by and no one took any notice of them Two children running by the wayside were nothing uncommon, that anyone should remark on it and reflect about it; and one or two people who did look at them and recognise them sup-

posed that they were going somewhere on some errand for Sandro or for Bruno.

They went along unmolested till the sun rose higher and the glittering heavy dews began to pass off from the earth as the day widened.

They descended the hill and proceeded along the straight road of the plain; the great line of the northern mountains unrolled before them in the morning light, with airy grey summits high in the clouds, and the lower spurs purple with shadow, and here and there the white gleam of a village dropped in a ravine, or of a little town shining at the foot of a bold scarp. Monte Morello rose the highest of all the heights, looking a blue, solemn, naked peak against the radiant sky, keeping the secrets of his green oak forests and his emerald snakes for such as have the will and strength to see him near. Beyond, in the distance, far behind the nearer range, were the fantastic slopes of the mountains by the sea, that saw the flames of Shelley's pyre rise on the solitary shore. They were of faint rose hue, and had a silvery light about them. Signa looked at them; they seemed to him like domes and towers.

"Are those temples, do you think?" he said, in an awed voice, to Gemma.

Gemma looked, and put her finger in her mouth.

"Perhaps they are the tops of the big booths at the fair."

"Oh, Gemma!" he said, with pained disgust, and would have loosened his hand, but she held it too close and tight.

"If they are booths, we shall get to them in time," she said.

"I would rather they were temples, though we might never get to them," said he, with heat and pain.

"That is silly," said Gemma.

What use were those temples that one never got to;—or of any temples, indeed? Nobody ever fried in them, or made sweetmeats.

That is what she thought to herself, but she did not say so aloud. He was so silly; he never saw these things; and she wished to keep him in good humour.

In time they reached Poggio Caiano: they were used to run along dusty roads in the sun

and did not tire quickly. They could both of them run a dozen miles or more with very little fatigue, but it was now seven in the morning.

"I am thirsty," said Gemma. "I should like some milk. Ask for it."

There was a cottage by the side of the road with wooden sheds and cackling hens, and bits of grass land under shady mulberries. She saw two cows there. Signa hung back.

"We have nothing to buy it with—nothing!"

"How helpless you are," said Gemma, and she put her pretty golden head in at the cottage door. There was a brown, kindly-looking woman there, plucking dead pigeons.

"Dear mother," said Gemma, coaxingly, "you look so good, could you give us just a little drop of water? We have been walking half the night. Father is gone to Prato with a string of donkeys to sell, and we are to meet him there, and we are so—oh, so thirsty!"

"Poor little souls!" said the woman, melted in a moment, for all Italians are kind in little things. "My child, what a face you have —like the baby, Jesus! Step in here and I

will get you a draught of milk. Is that your brother?"

"Yes," said Gemma.

"Oh, Gemma! to lie is so wicked!" murmured Signa, plucking at her ragged skirt.

"Is it?" said Gemma, showing her pearly teeth; "then everybody is wicked, dear; and the good God must have his hands full!"

The woman brought them out two little wooden bowls of milk.

Gemma drank from hers as thirstily and prettily as a little snake could do. Signa refused his. He said he did not wish for it.

"Perhaps you are hungry," said the woman, and offered them two hunches of wholesome bread.

Signa shook his head and put his hands behind his back.

Gemma took both.

"You are so kind," she said, winningly, "and we are hungry. My brother is shy, that is all."

"Poor little dear!" said the good housewife, won and touched, so that she brought out some figs as well. "And you have been walking far?

and have so far still to go? Your father is cruel."

"He is very poor," said Gemma, sadly, "and glad to get a copper driving the asses. We come from Scandicci, a long way."

And then she threw her arms around the woman prettily, and kissed her, and trotted on, hugging the bread and figs.

The woman watched them out of sight.

"A sweet child," she thought. "If the good Madonna had only given me the like!—ah me! I would have thanked her day and night. The boy is handsome too—but sulky. Poor babies, it is very far to go."

And she called Gemma back and kissed her again, and gave her a little bit of money, being a soft-hearted soul and well to do herself.

"Is it wicked to lie?" said Gemma to Signa, showing her white little teeth again. "But, look! —it does answer, you see!"

"I cannot talk to you, Gemma," said the boy, wearily; "you are so wrong, you grieve me so."

Gemma laughed.

"And yet it is me you always want to kiss—

not Palma. Palma, who never tells a lie at all!"

Signa coloured. He knew that that was true. He went on silently, holding the violin close to him, and not giving his hand to Gemma any more. She did not try to take it; it was too far for him to turn back.

They came to the royal gardens of the palace where once Bianca Capella reigned and was happy, and studied her love philtres and potions for death's sleep. Some great gates stood ajar; there were the green shade of trees and shadows of thick grass.

"Let us go in," said Gemma; and they went in, and she sat down on the turf and began to taste the sweetness of her figs.

Signa stood by her, silent and sad. She was so wrong, and yet she was so pretty, and she could make him do the things he hated, and he was full of pain, because he had left the Lastra and the hills, and went he knew not whither.

"What are you doing there, you little tramps! Be off with you," cried one of the gardeners of the place, espying them.

Gemma lifted to him her blue caressing eyes.

"Are we doing wrong? Oh, dear signore, let us stop a little, just a very little; we will not stir from here; only we are so tired, so very tired, and in the road it is hot and dusty and the carts are so many!"

The gardener looked at her and grumbled, and relented.

"If you do not stir you may stop a little while —a very little," he said at last. "Where have you come from, you baby angel?"

"From Scandicci; and we go to Prato."

The man lifted his hands in horror, because Scandicci was a long long way, away upon the Greve river.

"From Scandicci! Poor children! Well, rest a little if you like."

And he left the gate open for them.

"Have you beautiful flowers here?" said Gemma, softly glancing through the trees. "I do love flowers!"

She did not care for a flower more than for a turnip, living amongst gardens always, as she had

done. But she knew flowers went to market, like the butter and the eggs.

"Do you? You are a flower yourself," said the gardener, who had had three pretty children and lost them. "What are you going to do, you and your brother?"

"We are going to play in Prato. We have no father or mother. He makes the music and I dance," said Gemma, who, though without imagination of the finer sort, could ring the changes prettily in lying.

"Poor little things; and what are your names?"

"I am Rita; and he is Paolo," said Gemma. "Do you think you could give me a flower—just one—to smell at as I go along?"

"I will see," said the man, smiling.

Signa stood by mute, with a swelling heart. He knew that he ought to stop her in her falsehoods, but he was afraid to vex her and afraid to lose her. He listened, wounded and ashamed, and feeling himself a coward.

"Why do you do such things, Gemma?" he cried, piteously, as the gardener turned away.

"It is no use telling you, you are so silly,"

said Gemma; and she ate fig after fig, lying on her back in the shade of the trees where once Bianca and Francesco had wandered when their love and the summer were at height; and where their spirits wander still at midnight, so the peasants say.

In a little time the gardener returned, bringing with him a basket of cut flowers.

"You may like to sell these in Prato," he said to the child. "And you will find a peach or two at the bottom."

"Oh, how good you are!" cried Gemma, springing up; and she kissed the flowers and then the brown hand of the man.

"You have but a sulky companion, I fear," said the gardener, glancing at the boy, who stood aloof.

"Oh, no! He is only shy and tired. What is this great house?"

"It is a palace."

"Are there people in it?"

"No. Only ghosts!"

"Ghosts of what?"

"Of a great wicked woman who lived here; and

her lovers. She was a baker's daughter, but she murdered many people, and got to be a duchess of Tuscany."

"Did she murder them to be a duchess?"

"They say so; and to keep her secrets!"

Gemma opened wondering eyes.

"And she walks here at night?"

"By night; not that I can say I have ever seen her myself."

"I should like to meet her."

"Why?"

"Perhaps she would tell me how she did it."

The gardener stared,—then laughed.

"You pretty cherub!—if you have patience, and grow a woman, you will find out all that yourself."

"Come away," said Signa, and he dragged her out through the open gates.

She turned to kiss her hand to the gardener. Signa dragged her on in haste.

"A rude boy that," said the man, as he shut the gates on them.

"They are flowers worth five francs!" said

Gemma, hugging her basket of roses; "and you think it is no use to tell lies?"

"I think it is very vile and base."

"Pooh!" said Gemma, and she danced along in the dust. She had got a basket worth five francs, bread and fruit enough for the day, and some copper pieces as well; all by looking pretty and just telling a nice little lie or two.

He seemed very helpless to her. He had got nothing.

"It is very hot walking," she said, presently.

"Yes," said Signa. "But we are used to it you and I."

"I hate it, though."

"But we must do it if we want to get to Prato."

"Must we?"

She thought a few minutes, then looked behind her; in the distance there were coming along a baroccino and an old white horse.

Gemma gave a sudden cry of pain.

"What is it, Gemma, dear?" cried Signa, melted in a moment and catching her.

"I have twisted my foot on a stone. Oh, Signa, how it hurts!"

She sat down on a log of wood that chanced to lie there, and rubbed her little dusty foot dolefully. Signa knelt down in the dust, and took the little wounded foot upon his knee and caressed it with fond words. He could see no hurt; but then no one sees sprains or strains till they begin to swell.

"Oh, Signa, we never shall get on! It hurts me so!" she cried, and sobbed and moaned aloud.

The cart stopped; there were old people in it coming from the city itself, people who did not know them.

"Is there anything the matter?" cried the old folks, seeing the little girl crying so bitterly.

"She has hurt herself," said Signa. "She has twisted her ancle or something, and we go to Prato. Oh, Gemma, dear Gemma, is it so very bad?"

Gemma answered by her sobbing.

The old man and woman chattered together a little, then seeing the children were so pretty and

seemed so sad, told them there was room in the cart; they themselves were going to Prato—there were eight miles more to do; the boy might lift the girl in if he liked.

Gemma soon was borne up and seated between the two old people; Signa was told that he might curl himself, if he would, on the rope foot-place of the baroccino, and did so. The white horse rattled onward.

"You are a pretty boy, too," said the woman to Signa. "Why do you not talk to one?"

"I have nothing to say," he murmured.

He would not lie; and he could not tell the truth without exposing Gemma's pretty fables.

"You are more sulky than your sister; one would think it was your foot that had been hurt," said the old woman.

It was the third time in half an hour that, through Gemma, he had been called sulky. He hung his head, and was mute, taking care that Gemma's ankle should not be shakened as they went.

The way seemed to him very long.

He could see little on account of the dust,

which rose in large quantities along the road, for the weather was dry and the traffic to the fair was great. Now and then he saw the purple front of Monte Morello and the towers of Prato, lying underneath it to the westward, and farther the dark quarried sides of the serpentine hills, with the crimson gleam of jasper in the sun; and, much farther still, Pistoia; that was all.

Signa took her foot between his hands, and held it tenderly, so that the jolting should not jar it more than he could help.

Her sobs ceased little by little, and she chattered softly with the old driver, telling him that she was going to Prato to sell flowers, and her brother to make a few coins by playing if he could; they had no father or mother. She cried out a little now and then, when the cart went rougher than usual over a loose stone.

"Are you in such pain, dear? Oh, if only I could bear it for you!" said Signa; and the tears came in his eyes to think that she should suffer so much.

"It is better; do not fret," said Gemma, gravely; and the old woman in the cart thought

what a sweet-tempered child it was, so anxious to be patient and not vex her brother. For Gemma had the talent to get credit for all the virtues that she had not—a talent which is of much more use than any real possession of the virtues ever can be.

The eight miles were very tedious and mournful even to Signa; he was full of sorrow for her little bruised foot, and full of care for her future and his own, and full of reproach to himself for having let her come with him.

"Whatever will come of it—all is my fault," he thought, tormenting himself whilst the white horse trotted wearily over the bad road, and the clouds of dust blew round them and obscured the green sunny valley and the shining Bisenzio river.

Gemma, moaning a little now and then, leant her curly head against the old woman's knee, and before very long fell fast asleep, her long black lashes sweeping her rosy cheeks.

"The innocent lamb!" said the woman, tenderly, and covered her face from the sun and from the flies.

When the cart stopped at the south gate of Prato, the old woman woke Gemma softly:

"My pretty dear, we cannot get the things out without moving you, but if you will sit a bit in the shade by the wall there, we will take you up again in a minute, and put you where you like; or maybe you will stay with us and have a taste of breakfast."

Her husband lifted Gemma with much care down upon the stones, and set her on a bench, Signa standing still beside her.

"What is to be done, Gemma?" he said, with a piteous sigh. "Tell these good people the truth, dear, and they will take care of you, and drive you back again to Giovoli, I am sure. As for me, it does not matter."

"You are a *grullo!*" said Gemma, with calm contempt, which meant in her tongue that he was as foolish a thing as lived. "Wait till they are not looking, then do what I do."

Soon the man and woman had their backs turned, and were intent on their cackling poultry and strings of sausages.

"Now!" said Gemma, and she darted round a

corner of the gate, and ran swiftly as a young hare down the narrow street, clasping her flower-basket close to her all the while.

"But you are not lame at all!" cried Signa, stupefied, when at length, panting and laughing, she paused in her flight.

Her azure eyes glanced over him with a smile of intense amusement.

"Lame! of course not! But we wanted a lift. I got it. That was all."

"Oh, Gemma!"

He felt stunned and sick. He could only look at her. He could not speak. He thought the very stones of the street would open and swallow her for such wickedness as this.

Gemma laughed the more to see his face. She could not perceive anything amiss in what she had done. It had been fun to see the people's anxiety for her; and then they had been carried the eight miles they wanted:—how could anything be wrong that had so well succeeded?

Gemma, with her little plump bare shoulders and her ragged petticoat, reasoned as the big world does:—Success never sins.

Signa could not laugh. He would not answer her. He felt wretched.

"You are a kill-joy!" said Gemma, pettishly, and sat down on a door-step to tie up her flowers and consider what it would be best worth her while to do.

She decided that it was of no use at all to consult him. He was full of silly scruples that grew naturally in him, as choke-grass in the earth.

"It is very nice to be away from everybody," said Gemma, sorting her flowers, and looking about her with keen pleasure in the sense of liberty and strangeness.

"Oh, Gemma! It breaks one's heart," murmured Signa, while the water swam in his eyes. He thought his heart was broken. He felt powerless and unutterably wretched. A companion who would have clung to him and needed his protection and his aid would have aroused his courage; but Gemma's hardihood and dauntlessness and reckless wrong-doing only seemed to crush him and bewilder him till he felt like any frightened kid lost upon the mountains.

When she rose, he rose also, and crept after her spiritless and weary.

The bold craft of her practical mind and her little merciless words of worldly wisdom beat into impotency all the finer impulses and higher intelligence of his own. Moral impudence scourges spiritual beauty till it is cowed like a whipt dog.

Gemma, for her part, was indifferent; she felt herself the master-mind of the two; she was perfectly happy seeing strange things, and not knowing what new turn fortune might not take any minute; she thought of Palma hoeing and toiling amongst the cabbages at home with scornful pity, and said to herself, "how nice it is to be away and not have a soul to scold one!" When they came in sight of the cathedral and the belfry, Signa, moved to sudden interest, pulled her skirt.

"Let us go and see the *sacra cintola*," whispered the boy, for he was a devout little fellow, and had heard all his days from all the countryside of the wonders of the holy girdle that Prato enshrines.

"What will the *sacra cintola* do for us?" said Gemma.

"Nothing," said Signa, sadly, "nothing—now we have told so many lies."

"The girdle would not have had that cart," said Gemma, with a smile that would have been a grin only she was so pretty; and she let Signa draw her onward to the square where the Duomo stands, because, as she thought to herself, there would surely be the most people there, it being the hour of high mass—people always made themselves safe with heaven before they began to jump about and eat and drink.

"Look!" said Signa, forgetful one moment of his woes in his delight at looking up at the great duomo of which so many legends were rife in the country-side. "Look! Gemma, look! There is Donatello's pulpit, where they used to show the girdle to the people on the feast days; Donatello you know, who once was only just a little poor boy like me, and lived to make the marble speak; the signore at the Certosa told me so; do you think they ever will talk of me hundreds of years after I am dead and gone, as they do about

him? Oh, I think they will, because the music does last like the stone, though no one can touch it and feel it like the stone—and I am sure one day I will make some music that they will care about. Oh, Gemma, you are not looking—just see those beautiful children up there, all in the marble, with the white flowers! And where is the mark of the man's hand that was cut off for sacrilege, you remember? Teresina has told us about it so often!—it was thrown up in the air, you know, and the blood of it made a spot like an open palm on the grey wall up above, that is always, always there; only surely the angels might wash it out *now;* he must have suffered so much, and been so sorry by this!"

And Signa, trembling at his own vivid imaginations, stood still, gazing up and trying to see the blood-stain amongst the black and green serpentine of the inlaying above Lucca della Robbia's Virgin, with her S. Stephen and S. Lawrence. The story was so real to him, he could see the wicked monk going round and round in the aisles, in the dark, with his stolen treasure, unable to find his way out, and believing himself on

the road to his own monastery, and so striking on the panels of the great door, and crying "Open, open!" and thus calling down detection and chastisement with his own voice. He could see it all, and he stood gazing up and looking for the blood-stain above Donatello's happy snow white children, till he trembled all over with the awe and fever of his own visions. Gemma, not heeding at all and quite indifferent to the sacred girdle, since it was nothing pretty to put on herself, sniffed with her dainty little nose the various fumes of frying and stewing that came from the open doors and windows of the houses in the square, and decided with herself that it was high time to get something more to eat.

It was noon, and breakfast was being prepared everywhere, and a slice of smoking kid or a taste of boar stuffed with prunes were more to her taste than all the stone children of Donatello. She had known what such dainties meant at fairs at Signa and Impruneta, whither she had occasionally been taken by kindly baby-loving women who pitied her because she had no mother.

She pondered a little; smelling the fragrance of the soup pots, whilst the crowds of people let loose from high mass, like boys from school, filled the piazza, laughing, buzzing, chattering, pushing, loitering, with the broad bright sky cloudless above their heads.

Gemma went and looked wistfully in at an open arched entrance of a fruit shop; beyond, she saw a kitchen with a plump motherly woman in an orange kerchief, who was just taking off the fire a frying-pan full of bacon and lard, browned and ready for eating.

"Might I just lay my flowers here in the shade one moment or two," said little Gemma, timidly slipping her basket on to the stone slab under the cool wet leaves that kept the strawberries fresh. "Might I just leave them here one moment with you, they will all fade away in the sun."

"Certainly, my pretty one," said the woman. "But where do you want to go?"

Gemma looked very shy and sad.

"Only—to see—to buy—a little bit of bread. I have a centime, and I am so hungry—"

"When did you eat last?"

"Yesterday at noon. Mother is just dead, and there was no more bread in the house, and no money."

"Poor little soul!" cried the good woman, with her charity alive in a second; human charity is a match that will strike light very quickly, only it will go out again very nearly as rapidly. "Poor little sweet soul!"

"It shall never be said that I turned a hungry child empty away. Come in and eat your fill. There is only my husband; and we are half famished too, for there has been no getting a mouthful were it ever so, so busy as this morning has been; there is scarce a stalk of fruit left, as you see, already. Come in, you pretty morsel, and eat for two."

Gemma did eat for two, taking no remembrance of Signa outside by the cathedral in the sun. He was well enough with his Donatello and his nonsense. Meanwhile she stuffed her little round mouth full of crisp, brown, savoury bacon, and swallowed her little glass of blue wine, and picked as many bigarreau cherries as she chose, and

touched to the quick the hearts of her host and hostess, who were childless.

They only let her go again with many promises that she would return, which indeed she gave willingly, with every intention of keeping them if she found nothing better to do. When she had got her flowers and ran out again to look for Signa, she could not find him. That dismayed her, because he was her mine of money. She pondered a little, selling some flowers in the square meanwhile, because, as she reflected, however sorry one may be, pence are not the less sweet-smelling for that; then reasoned with herself that such a silly as he would be sure to be inside the cathedral dreaming about the sacrilegious monk; and there, in truth, did she find him, sitting on the lower step of the high altar, with the bronze crucifix above him.

Signa was very pale from weariness and long fasting; but his eyes were full of brightness, and he was almost happy; someone had been playing on the organ somewhere unseen, the church being empty and the custodians dozing in noontide rest, and the noble silence around him and

the deep coolness and the beautiful colours and fuzes so lulled him, and yet excited him, that he knew nothing of the flight of time.

"Are you not hungry?" said Gemma, pattering up and dipping her golden head in half impudent obeisance before the altar.

"Hungry? Oh, no!"

The word seemed to him almost like a sacrilege; yet he was hungry, only he had no leisure or sense for it.

"I am," said Gemma, knowing that her wants were the strongest levers to stir him into movement.

"Are you? I am sorry," said Signa vaguely, half remorsefully, yet almost incapable, in that beauty and holiness which were around him, of bringing his mind wholly to any ordinary daily thing. "Are you, dear? I am sorry. What can we do? But, oh, Gemma dear, can you feel *very* hungry in this place? Do look at the paintings. Fra Lippi did them, someone said. He was a monk, I think. And then look at those terrible grey faces and the tails like snakes—they are meant for Sins, are they not? It frightens one, and yet it is so beautiful, all of it."

Gemma looked with a sort of scorn at the marble sphinxes with their serpent bodies on Mino da Fiesole's pulpit. They did not move her.

"Sins are pleasant. Those are ugly things," she said with a premature wisdom. "And I am hungry. Come out."

Signa went lingeringly, reluctantly looking back into the calm eyes of the sphinxes, and sorrowful to be forced out of that solemnity and stillness into the noise and the confusion of the fair.

"How happy the man must have been who made all those things," he said to himself, with a dim perception of the beauty of ages in which labour was done for sake of faith and country and God's will, and not for sake of gold alone.

Gemma jogged his shoulder.

"Do not go to sleep! Come close to me, and do what I ask you—that is all."

Keeping tight hold of his violin and its bow, Signa obeyed her; the bright, prompt, unswerving will of Gemma always bore him away with it, without any volition of his own. The ascendency

of the unscrupulous will tells, in small lives as in great.

She led him through the flocking people, with the loud clanging bells and the hot sunshine above them.

The noble brown walls of Prato shut in that day a gay and noisy multitude. There were unusual attractions in the way of shows and travelling actors. The country folk had come in from the plain and from both sides of the mountains. The copper-smelters from the valley of the Bisenzio, the quarry-workers from Figlone, the pottery-painters from Doccia, the straw-plaiters and red-cap makers of the town itself, the villagers from all the little places round about for twenty miles and more, all had contributed to swell the sum of the merrymaking throngs that put on their best, and ate and drank, made love and bought trinkets and shouted and sang under the frown of the old Ghibelline Castello and the prison that was once a Guelph Palace. There were booths in the streets, flags on the roofs, merry faces at the old grated casements; there was all the uproar of lotteries,

charlatans, cheapjohns, and the players of puppets; asses brayed, children screamed, maidens laughed, mandolines twanged, kids and pigs were roasting whole in the streets, mounds of plums and cherries reddened the stones with their juice, barrels of wine ran in a hundred dark old kitchens and at many a quaint corner under a terra-cotta shrine in the wall; and above all the happy breathless turmoil rose bell-tower and cupola and fortress and monastery, and above them again the fair blue sky.

Gemma slipped in amongst the multitude, keeping one of Signa's hands in hers.

She watched her opportunity. There was a pause. One puppet-show had just ended; the tombola had not begun. She let go his hand.

"Play," she said, simply.

"Play!" echoed Signa, with his beaming eyes full of pain. "Oh, Gemma! how can I play! so wretched as I am, and away from the Lastra; and Bruno hating me, perhaps; and Nita blind; and all through my own wickedness!"

"Chè!" said Gemma, with serene contempt; "standing crying never mended a broken pot

yet; Babbo says so a dozen times a week. I want some sweet cakes, and you have got to get them. How shall we keep ourselves if you do not play? It is all you are good for."

"How cruel you are!" sobbed the boy, his heart in revolt at his little tyrant, yet his courage weak against her.

"Oh, you silly!" laughed Gemma, and pulled his curls. "Let us dance, then—do as I do—dance the saltarello that old Maro from the Marches taught us last year—that will make you merrier."

And Gemma began to dance herself, in the agile lithe postures that an old wandering fiddler had taught to the children of the Lastra; for Tuscany has no dance of its own except the droll trescone, which resembles the hopping of frogs.

"Dance, and play the tune!" said Gemma, imperiously, looking like a little flower blowing up and down in the wind, as her white arms went up above her head, and her small naked feet twinkled on the stones.

Signa, by sheer instinct, obeyed her as a

poodle would have done, making the tune come off the strings of his Rusignuolo, and moving wearily to her lithesome invitation, his head hanging down, and his feet feeling like lead, and the big tears coursing down his cheeks.

"Oh, the little love, let one look at her!" said a woman or two, and cleared a space; and others gathered about, and a ring was made, and one score of people, and then another, and then another, gradually grew together, and watched Gemma in the saltarello, which no busked maiden from the wet green woods of the Marches, and no Roman child under the vinehung loggia of a Trastevere winehouse, ever danced with more spirit or more grace.

Gemma was at home in the air, like a butterfly; and untiring she whirled around, and spurned the pavement, as if her little dusty toes had the wings of Mercury.

"Oh, the beautiful little angel!" cried the women, when at last she ceased, hot, and breathless, and panting, with all her yellow hair blown back; and they kissed her, and worshipped her,

and loaded her with sweetmeats, and cheap trinkets, and playthings.

Signa stood apart, with swollen eyes and a swelling heart.

"What fun it is!" said Gemma to him, with her little skirt full of her spoils.

Signa was silent.

"A sulky boy," said the women. "Is he your brother, my dear?"

"Yes, and he plays so beautifully," said Gemma. "He was too tired to dance well. Play, dear, play for these good kind people, who have given us such lovely things."

The words were simple, and she caressed him as she spoke, but in his ear she whispered: "Play, and get some money; or I will tell the guards, and send you back to Lippo."

Signa was helpless in her hands.

If he were sent back, there would be woe—and the galleys for Bruno.

He obeyed her, and drew the bow across the strings, and played his old favourite *Misero Pargoletto*, of Leo, which he had played so many times, that it came to him by sheer instinct and

habit. He could not play amiss, even when he was not thinking what he did, his hands found the true place, and struck out the true music.

Insensibly, the sweet accustomed sounds soothed him, drove away his pain, and calmed his sense of desolation and of danger.

Insensibly, he went on from one thing to another, and the melody gained on the people. They are sure judges of what is pure and excellent. Their ear is accurate; their feeling unerring. The little figure in their midst, with the sweet and serious face, and the small brown hands, that moved so perfectly, touched and won them. Muledrivers, copper miners, pottery-painters, peasants, townsfolk, merry-makers, gathered together, and listened to the child, till silence fell on the crowded square, and Gemma, seizing the moment, slipped in from one to another, holding out her little empty palm, and whispering, while her pockets were full of halfpence, and her ears were full of praises: "We are so hungry, my brother and I!"

CHAPTER XV.

As it chanced that day Bruno heard nothing. He did not leave his fields, the week being the threshing time, and he having a man to help him whom he had to pay, and being anxious to do all his grain and stack the straw entirely before the Sunday. And down in the Lastra, Lippo, whose courage though not his wrath had cooled, found excuse to go up to his sheep who were ailing, and got out of reach of his wife's tongue, and spent the day in pondering how best he could compass the getting back the money without rousing the ire of his brother too hotly on his own person. He held Bruno by a chain indeed, but he had a foreboding that under too severe a strain the chain would snap, and he

repented him of the impolitic passion into which his wife had hurried him—nine years of prudence and hypocrisy had been undone in five minutes' rage!

It was eight in the evening. There was red still in the sky, but the sun had gone down. Bruno had set a torch in the ring in the wall of his stone stable, and was still threshing by its light with the peasant whom he had hired to help him. Unless they worked late and early there could be no chance of finishing the grain by the Sunday morning; and he wanted it threshed and done with, that he might have all his time for his maize and vines, and begin the ploughing forthwith.

The ruddy light gleamed on and off; the flails rose and fell; the floor was golden; the walls were black; the air blew in, fragrant with the smell of the meadow-mint in the fields and the jessamine that clung to the arched doors, and the stone-pines that dropped their cones on the grass above where the hill was rock.

Bruno was very tired and hot; he had worked all day on a drink of sharp wine from four of the

CH knew

, Gemma's sister.

As it chanc nere. You will get a

He did not said roughly.

threshing ted Palma, who was crying.

him wh crying all the way up the hill.

to do ou want the boy he is in the Lastra.

bef out of the way."

I "Is he not here? We were sure they were here," said Palma, with a sob, knee-deep in the tossing straw.

"No," said Bruno, whirling his flail about his head. "Be off with you. I can have no brats idling here."

"But Signa is lost, and Gemma was with him!" said Palma, with wide open black eyes of abject terror."

what do you mean? The boy is
the Lastra, doing Lippo's

with a sob. "They were
—very early—Mimi saw
together—very fast—
Babbo sent me to ask you
that they were here. But old
says that Signa must have run away,
use Lippo and Nita beat him horribly—about
a fiddle—I do not know—and all the town is
talking because Signa hit Nita in the eyes; and
I know she was cruel to him always, only he
never, never would tell you."

Bruno flung down his flail with an oath that made the little girl tremble where she stood in the gold of the corn.

"Stay till I come, Neo," he said quickly to the contadino working with him, and caught his cloak from a nail, and without another word or a glance at the sobbing child, strode away through his vines in the twilight.

Palma ran with him on her sturdy little legs, telling him all she knew, which was the same

thing over and over again. Bruno heard in unbroken silence.

His long stride and the child's rapid little trot kept them even, and took them fast into the road and on to the bridge. At the entrance of this bridge Sandro met them: though the children were always together, Sandro knew little of Bruno, and was afraid of the little he did know. But the common bond of their trouble made them friends. He seized hold of Bruno as he went on to the bridge—

"Do not waste time in the Lastra. He is not in the Lastra. There was some horrid quarrel—so they say. Nita knocked the boy down—all about that fiddle and the quantity of money. The boy has run away, and my Gemma with him—my pretty little Gemma!—and a minute ago there came in Nisio with his baroccino; he has been to Prato, and he says he saw them there, and thought that we had sent them—there is a fair. You can see Nisio; he is stopping at the wineshop just across. That was at four in the day he saw them. The boy was playing. Will you go? I do not see how I can go—they will

turn me away at Giovoli if I go—all my carnations potting and all my roses budding—and then the goat is near her labour, and nothing but this child to see to her or to keep the boys in order—and what the lad could take Gemma for, if he would run away, though she was only a trouble in the house, and a greedy poppet always, still—"

Bruno, before half his words were done, was away over the bridge, and had reached the wine-shop, and had confronted Nisio — Dionisio Riggo, a chandler and cheesemonger of the Lastra, who had a little bit of land out Prato way.

"You saw—the boy—in Prato?"

Nisio grinned.

"I saw Lippo's foundling in Prato. Is that much to you? Nay, nay! I meant no offence indeed. Only you are so soft upon the boy—people will talk! Yes, he was there, playing a fiddle in a crowd. And the little girl of Sandro's—the pretty white one—with him. Only a child's freak, no doubt. I thought they were out there for a holiday. Else I would have spoken, and

have brought them home. But they can take no harm."

Bruno left him also without a word, and went on his way as swiftly as the wind up to the house of Lippo.

Old Baldo was working at a boot at his board before his door. Lippo, who had just come down from the hills, was standing idling and talking with his gossip the barber. His wife was ironing linen in an attic under the roof, her eyes none the worse, though she had bound one up with a red handkerchief that she might make her moan with effect to the neighbours.

Bruno's hand fell like a sledge-hammer on his brother's shoulder before Lippo knew that he was nigh.

"What did you do to the boy?"

Lippo trembled, and his jaw fell. People came out of the other doorway. Old Baldo paused with his awl uplifted. Children came running to listen. Bruno shook his brother to and fro as the breeze shakes a cane by the river.

"What did you do to the boy?"

"I did nothing," stammered Lippo. "We

were vexed—all that money—and nothing but a fiddle to show. That was natural you know—only natural was it? And then the child grew in a dreadful passion, and he flew on my poor good Nita like a little wild cat, and blinded her—she is blind now. That is all the truth, and the saints are my testimony!"

"That is a lie, and the devils are your sponsors!" shouted Bruno, till the shout rang from the gateway to the shrine. "If harm have come to the child, I will break every bone in your body. I go to find him first—then I will come back and deal with you."

He shook Lippo once more to and fro, and sent him reeling against the cobbler's board, and scattered Baldo's boots and shoes and tools and bits of leather right and left; then without looking backward or heeding the clamour he had raised, he dashed through the Lastra to get home, and fetch money, and find a horse.

Old Baldo did not love his son-in-law. His daughter had been taken by Lippo's handsome, soft, pensive face, and timid gentleness and suavity of ways, as rough, strong, fierce-tempered

women often are; and Baldo had let her have her way, though Lippo had brought nothing to the common purse. It was a bad marriage for Nita, the sole offspring of the old cobbler, who owned the house he lived in, and let some floors of it, and was a warm man all the Lastra said, with cosy little bits of money here and there, and morsels of land even, bought at bargains, and a shrewd head and a still tongue, so that he might be worth much more than even people fancied, where he sat stitching at his door, with a red cap and a pair of horn spectacles, and a wicked old tongue that could throw dirt with any man's or woman's either.

Lippo stood quivering, and almost weeping.

"So good as we have been!" he moaned.

"You white-livered cur!" swore old Baldo, who had been toppled off his stool, and was wiping the dust off his grey head, and groping in the dark for his horn spectacles, with many oaths. "You whining ass! Your brother only serves you right. It is not for me to say so. It is ill work washing one's foul linen in the town fountain. But if Bruno break your neck he will

serve you right—taking his money all these years, and starving his brat, and beating it;—pah!"

"And what would you have said if I had pampered it up with dainties?" said Lippo, panting and shivering, and hoping to heaven Nita's hands were in the starch, and her ears anywhere than hearkening out of the window.

"That is neither here nor there," said old Baldo, who, like all the world, detested the *tu quoque* form of argument. "That is neither here nor there. The pasticcio was none of my making. I said there were brats too many in the house. But you have got good pickings out of it, that is certain; and it is only a raging lion like Bruno, a frank fool, and a wrathful, and for ever eating fire and being fleeced like a sheep, that would not have seen through you all these years."

Lippo upset the stall again by an excess of zeal in searching for the spectacles, and prayed the saints, who favoured him, to serve him so that, in the noise of all the falling tools, his terrible father-in-law's revelations might not reach the listening barber.

Rage in, wit out:—Lippo sighed to think that his lot fell for ever amongst people who saw not the truth and wisdom of this saying.

He found the spectacles, and then gathered himself together with a sigh.

"My brother shall not go alone to seek the boy," he said, with gentle courage and a sigh. "I thought the child was safe upon the hill, or else——Harm me?—oh, no! Poor Bruno is a rough man; but he owes me too much—besides, he is not bad at heart—oh, no! Perhaps I was hasty about that money. After all, it was the child's. But when people are poor, as we all are, and never taste meat hardly twice a year, and so much sickness and trouble everywhere, it overcomes one. So much money for a toy!—for, after all, an old lute does as well. Tell Nita I am gone to look for Signa, and may be out all night."

"He is a good man, and it is a shame to treat him so," said the women at the doors.

Old Baldo picked up his waxed thread, and made a grimace to himself, as he went to his work again, with a lanthorn hung up above him

on a nail. But it was not for him to show his daughter, or her husband, in the wrong. Besides, popular feeling, so far as it was represented in the lane between the gateway and the shrine, was altogether with Lippo.

He had struck a chord that was sure to answer. People who lived on black bread and cabbages, and had a good deal of sickness, and laboured from red dawn to white moonlight to fill empty mouths, were all ready to resent with him the waste of gold pieces on a child and a fiddle.

He knew the right key to turn to move his little world.

Good man as he was, he went down the lane with an angry heart, saying, as old Vasari has it, things that are not in the mass; but he said them to himself only, for he had a character to lose.

Under the light of the lamp that jutted out from the east gateway, where the old portcullis hangs, he saw Bruno. He was putting a little, rough, short pony into a baroccino, having hired both from a vintner, whose tavern and stable were open on to the street.

The baroccino was the common union of rope and bars and rotten wood and huge wheels, which looks as if it would be shivered at a step, but will in truth whirl unbroken over mountain-heights, and fly unsinking over a morass. The pony was one of those sturdy little beasts which, with a collar of bells and a head-dress of fox-tails, fed on straw and on blows, and on little else besides, will yet race over the country at that headlong, yet sure-footed, speed, which Tuscans teach their cattle, heaven knows how. Bruno had hired both of the vintner, to save the time that his return home would have taken him.

The street was quite dark. The lamp in the gateway shed a flickering gleam over Bruno's dark face and the brass of the pony's headstall.

Lippo's heart stood still within him with fear. Nevertheless, he went up to the place. He had a thing to say, and he knew he must say it then or never.

"Bruno, give me one word," he said, in a whisper, touching his brother on the arm.

Bruno flashed one glance on him, and went on buckling the straps of the harness.

"Are you going to quarrel with me—about the boy?"

"As God lives, I will kill you if harm come to him."

Lippo shivered.

"But if you find him safe and sound—boys are always safe and sound—do you mean to quarrel with me?—do you mean to take him away?"

"If you have dealt ill with him, it will be the worse for you."

Lippo knew the menace that was in his brother's voice, though Bruno did not look up once, nor leave off buckling and strapping. And he knew that he had dealt ill—very ill.

"Listen, Bruno!" he said, coaxingly. "He will tell you things, no doubt; children always whine. We have punished him sometimes;—one must punish children, or what would they be? If you listen, he will tell you things, of course. Children want to live on clover, and never do a stroke of work.'

Bruno freed his arm from his brother's hand, with a gesture that sent the strap he was fastening backward up into Lippo's face.

"You have hurt him, and you have lied, and you have betrayed me and cheated me," he said between his teeth. "I know that—I know that! Well, your reckoning will wait—till I have found the child."

Lippo's blood ran very cold. Concealment, he saw, was impossible any longer. If the boy were found, he knew that he would have scant mercy to look for from Bruno's hands.

"But hear a word, Bruno," he said; and his voice shook, and his fingers trembled as they clutched at Bruno's cloak, as the latter took the ropes that served for reins and put his foot on the step of the baroccino. "Just a word—just a word only. Will you take him away? Will you cease to pay? Will you break our compact? Is that what you mean?"

Bruno sprang on the little cart, and answered with a slash of his whip across Lippo's mouth.

Lippo, stung with the pain of the blow, and goaded by a laugh that he caught from the vintner, who stood watching in his tavern doorway, sprang up also on the iron bar that serves as footboard to the little vehicle.

"Take care what you do!" he hissed in his elder's ear. "Take care! If you cease to pay—if you take the child—I will say what I said. I will make him hate you; I will tell him who he is; I will tell him how you stabbed his mother at the fair; I will tell him how you—you—you left her alone dead for the flood to take her, and maybe had murdered her, for aught I know. And see how he will love you then, and eat your bread. Now strike me again, if you like. That is what I shall say. And what can you do? Tell me that—tell me that! Now go and ride out all the night, and think and choose. How weak you are!—ah, ah! How weak you are against me now!—how weak, with all your rage!"

Bruno struck him backward off the step. The pony dashed away into the darkness. Lippo fell in the dust.

When the tearing noise of the wheels and the hoofs flying away into the night over the stones had died away, Lippo lifted his head to the vintner, who had raised him from the ground, and had poured some wine into his mouth.

"Good friend," said gentle Lippo, with faltering breath, wiping the dust and a little blood from his forehead; "good friend, say nothing of this—it would only bring trouble on Bruno. I would have gone with him to find the boy, but you saw what his passion was. He thinks me to blame; perhaps I was. So much money thrown away on a toy of music for a child, when a pipe cut in the fields does as well, and it might have been laid aside for his manhood! And so much want as there is in the world! But never mind that; say I was wrong—only do not tell people of Bruno. You know he is brawling always, and that gets him a bad name; and not for paradise would I add to it. He is too quick with his hands, and will take life, I always fear, one day; but this was an accident—a pure accident only! Oh, I am well—quite well; not hurt at all. And your wine is so pure and good."

And he drank a little more of it, and then went away home; and the vintner watched him, going feebly, as one bruised and shaken would do; and shook his head, and said to three or four others who came in for a flask and a turn at

dominoes, that that beast Bruno had well-nigh killed his brother and driven over him; and that it would be well to give a hint of the story to the Carabineers when they should next come by looking after bad men and perilous tempers.

END OF VOL. I.

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